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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Desire and Dangdut Koplo: Women's Aspirations and Mobility in Indonesia's Most  
Popular Music

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

Andrea Louise Decker

September 2021

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson  
Dr. René T.A. Lysloff  
Dr. Muhamad Ali

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2021

The Dissertation of Andrea Louise Decker is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside



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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Desire and Dangdut Koplo: Women's Aspirations and Mobility in Indonesia's Most Popular Music

by

Andrea Louise Decker

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Music  
University of California, Riverside, September 2021  
Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson

While twenty years ago dangdut koplo was a regional music on the margins, today this sub-genre of dangdut has grown to become the most popular music in Indonesia. Only a few studies have discussed dangdut koplo (Weintraub 2013; Raditya 2013; Riyanto and Dewi 2021), and none have given sustained ethnographic attention to women's experience. Based on long-term ethnographic engagement and participant observation among dangdut koplo professionals, I show that women shape dangdut industries as producers, managers, MCs, radio hosts, fans, and instrumentalists as well as singers. I frame women in dangdut industries through the lens of performance practice, as neither "voiceless victims [nor] powerful agents" (Niessen, Leshkovich, and Jones 2003:31), focusing on their lived experience, desires, and voices. Dangdut singers and other women who break molds mitigate their desires [I. *nafsu*] to avoid shame [I. *malu*] and protect their reputations [I. *nama*]. Similarly, industry decision-makers like producers

and music directors temper the desires present in off-air dangdut practice to protect the reputation of dangdut itself and by extension the nation of Indonesia.

Drawing on ethnomusicology, dance studies, voice studies, gender studies, and media and cultural studies, I show how dangdut koplo practice is affected by other performance forms and gender ideologies. By using hybrid methods (Przybylski 2021) to explore their daily lives, interactions with new media, and onstage personas, I show how singers perform (or refuse to perform) the identity expectations set for them. I consider gender and space in dangdut koplo through the lens of the roads. Through ethnography of social media and backstage at television studios and radio stations, as well as close reading of television, I contribute to scholarship about women in music industries and women's fandom. I also reframe concepts of the Indonesian *rakyat* by showing how women's fandom on social media becomes a public sphere for debating desires for the nation, a theme also present in government and industry projects targeted at helping dangdut "go global." Dangdut koplo is a realm of argument about social class and women's bodies in which women use mass and social media to argue multiple sides of each issue.

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## **Introduction: Women Who Move, Moving Women**

I stood in a frigid television studio, a cool oasis in the sweltering metropolis of Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. I stood several feet behind the cameras, safely out of their range, facing the stage like them. The light features glared in front of me. The figures onstage, playing and singing a deafening, pulsing song, were somehow both the center of attention and largely ignored by the rest of us. This was business. The singer, glamorous and confident, had the power to capture attention and sway emotion even through the camera lens. However, the beautiful, powerful singer was only one of the women involved in creating and spreading music. At *Stasiun Dangdut*, one of the most influential television shows in the genre of music known as dangdut koplo, women were calling the shots (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Backstage at Stasiun Dangdut, May 2018. Photo by the author.*

“And...three, two, one, break. Hosts, you have three minutes,” said the producer Gita, a plump woman with an easy smile who sported a hijab under her JTV uniform (Figure 2). The singer broke her dramatic final pose and gingerly climbed down from the stage. The MCs stood up from their chairs in front of the feed television, checked their appearances using their cellphone cameras, and gathered their things. Lenny, the most experienced MC, was a petite woman in an elaborate matching full-length dress, robe, and hijab ensemble. Dian<sup>1</sup> was new; boisterous and smiley, she struggled to balance her banter with the two more established MCs. Candra, the sole man, well-dressed and vain, provided comic relief by putting on wigs and joking about his effeminateness (Figure 3).



*Figure 2: Producer Gita organizes props between commercial breaks at Stasiun Dangdut. Photo by the author.*

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed at her request.





*Figure 3: Lenny, Candra, and Dian hosting Stasiun Dangdut. Photo by the author.*

At that moment, Yuli entered through the heavy side door. The manager of Arka Dewi music, Yuli was in charge of the onstage band and at least one of the singers. Her delicate, cream-colored hijab was elegantly draped over her petite shoulders, though she sometimes tugged on it distractedly; she'd only begun to wear a hijab a few weeks earlier. A slight hush fell as she directed the young men with her to distribute the food she'd brought to set. The MCs, producer, and even the camera operators graciously accepted white cardboard boxes filled with sticky rice-flour snacks, white rice, and chicken. I tried to balance my cardboard box with the camera I was using to record the stage action. Lenny pulled me aside.

“You should be very polite to Yuli,” Lenny whispered to me. “She’s a good person, and very generous.”

A month later I was many kilometers to the west in Pati, Central Java, among still more powerful women at an open-air dangdut performance. I sat at the back edge of a stage with several singers, the women who accompanied them, and Bunda Monata, the wife in the husband-and-wife duo who manage the band OM Monata. At the front of the stage, beyond the barrier of stereo equipment that protected us from view, singer Ratna Antika held an audience of a thousand in thrall as she performed her set in a white jeans and a blue checkered vest. As she danced, she periodically paused and crouched to receive tips from audience members in a ritual practice called *saweran*. One man played at handing her a bill, but as she gently took it between her thumb and first two fingers, he suddenly gripped the bill tightly, pulling her towards him (see Figure 4). At the end of her song, she bounded to the back of the stage in her platform tennis shoes. She let the mask of her stage persona drop from her face, and she sighed.

“Such low energy today, and the *saweran* is slow.”





*Figure 4: Ratna Antika collects saweran in Pati, Central Java, July 2018, while guitarist Mas No looks on. Photo by the author.*

A call went out from the front of the stage; the audience had run out of small bills for *saweran* and needed to exchange their large bills for small ones. Exasperated, the manager, who went simply by Bunda Mintul or Bunda Monata, grabbed the cardboard box filled with cash and organized the singers into a smooth assembly line of bill counters (Figure 5). The large bills Bunda Mintul counted and carefully set aside in white envelopes to be distributed later. “Oh, I’ve been working with dangdut management since I was small,” she told me. “My father managed bands, and I always helped out.” She ran the band’s social media account, did most of the hiring of singers, and handled most of the money.



*Figure 5: Bunda Mintul (in the pale blue hijab, obscured) organizes the singers and their helpers to count and exchange bills backstage. Photo by the author.*

It was 2018, and dangdut koplo was having a national moment. Via Vallen had just skyrocketed to national fame, and koplo artists felt validated on the national stage. A music genre often considered to be tacky, overly erotic, and even morally bankrupt when performed live was firmly worming its way into people's ears and shedding its stigma. I had arrived in Indonesia for formal fieldwork several months earlier, interested in how women singers imagined their own subject position in a genre thus stigmatized, mind filled with academic narratives about exploitation and resistance. I learned, however, that the reality does not fit into a simple binary. While women performers undeniably face stigma, they also situate themselves as necessary and powerful actors in the Javanese social fabric. Rather than the male-dominated, exploitative recording and performing

industries I'd expected, I found that the dangdut industry is full of powerful women: producers, managers, MCs, radio hosts, fan clubs, and instrumentalists. In dangdut koplo industries, as in much of political and economic life in Java, women are more strongly represented in positions of power in comparison with the US.

That representation does not, however, mean that women, and especially singers, do not face social sanctions and barriers against their work. Though less pronounced than in other societies, particularly other Muslim ones, women who sing and dance for men in public are a marked category in Indonesia. The spectres of ancient Javanese stories about Dewi Sri, colonial forced labor, migration, prostitution, and New Order violent cleansing all haunt women's lives in dangdut koplo, influencing how they see themselves and their role in society. More modern pressures from mass and new media, global Islam, and neoliberal economic practices shape women's environs and posit competing arguments about ambitions women have for their own lives and the potential futures of Indonesia. I thus follow Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkovich, and Carla Jones in their call to attend to women as mid-level actors, neither elite nor abject. I also use the lens of performance practice, a compromise between practice theory and performance theory which recognizes both the forces shaping women's ideas about themselves, their abilities, and their world, while also recognizing their agency in shaping their worlds and selves in response (Niessen, Lechkowich, and Jones 2003:31, 23–4). Women performers are thus powerful but limited actors who frame themselves in relationship to the above myriad forces that influence their worldview, actions, and understandings of themselves.

The roles women in East and Central Javanese dangdut koplo imagine and take for themselves are a flashpoint in tensions between various visions for modernity and the haunting of the past, directly connected to differing aspirations for Indonesia as a nation. As Emma Bauch writes, “notions of ‘the local’ are being produced in a context of increasingly layered global interconnection” (Baulch 2020:3). Similarly, Jeremy Wallach asserts, “Popular culture (especially popular music) is an important site of cultural struggle” (2008:4). I use desire as a connecting thread. The Indonesian word for desire is *nafsu*, derived from Arabic. *Nafsu* carries connotations of excess, of overwhelming need for food, sex, and other pleasures that are best resisted. But it also has a more noble connotation of striving and ambition. Both connotations are threads in dangdut koplo. Through dangdut, women singers, fans, and managers enact their own desires towards class mobility and prosperity, which stand in contrast to how other social strata and formal national institutions view them. At the same time, government projects and television studios, with women in many leadership positions, attempt to sanitize and rehabilitate dangdut—removing aspects of *nafsu* perceived as too erotic or overwhelming—while balancing a myriad of conflicting objectives: the desires of the audience; the ambition of the performers; the wishes of governing bodies who use culture as a tool for nationalism; the demands of the elite and bourgeois who control television studios, radio stations, and advertising businesses; and pressures from conservative Islamic wings and moral panics.

Desire is thus always in dialogue with shame, or *malu*. Michelle Rosaldo defines shame as “the sanction of tradition, the acknowledgement of authority, the fear of

mockery, or the anxiety associated with inadequate or morally unacceptable performance” (1983:141). Elizabeth Fuller Collins and Ernaldi Bahar describe *malu* as a tool of social control that both maintains hierarchies and constrains individualism (2000:37). Similarly, Ayu Saraswati argues that *malu* is deployed as an affective tool promoting conformity in gendered terms, including dressing modestly and using beauty products to avoid negative gazes or attention (2013:112). For dangdut singers and other women—fans and music professionals—who break molds, their *desire* [I. *nafsu*] must be tempered to avoid shame and protect their reputations [I. *nama*]. Similarly, industry decision-makers like producers and music directors temper the desires present in off-air dangdut practice to protect the reputation of dangdut itself and by extension the nation of Indonesia.

### **Women Who Move, Moving Women**

Dangdut koplo moves women, and women move to follow the call of the drumbeat, the smooth, clear voices, and the promise of economic mobility. By women who move, I mean women like singers whose bodies physically move in space, flying over roads like the famed Jalur Pantura at all hours in pursuit of fame, upward mobility, and the pleasure of performing the music (Figure 6). Many women producers and managers get involved in the industry because they too see the potential for significant economic mobility. Dangdut koplo for many women represents a way they can make enough to support their families and even dramatically change their circumstances without education or much capital.





*Figure 6: Nasha Aquila performing in Pati, Central Java, with OM New Kendedes. Photo by the author. 2018.*

To be moved also means to be overcome with emotion, as Sara Ahmed has argued (2014:11). Women are fans and listeners of dangdut koplo and make up much of dangdut's audience (see Figure 7). Dangdut on television and new media deliberately appeals to them in particular. These women listen from home, falling asleep to the sounds of dangdut singing on Indosiar or MNCTV at the end of an exhausting day. They do not move physically, nor do they rely on dangdut for economic mobility. Instead, they hope to be moved—to be brought to a strong emotional state by the music and the glamorous trappings of dangdut television. They watch dangdut and connect with other fans on social media.



Figure 7: A group of local dangdut koplo fans, Pati, Central Java, June 2018. Photo by the author.

My focus on women listeners may come as a surprise because at off-air, outdoor concerts, men overwhelmingly dominate the audience. As I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, young women often feel that their physical safety and sexual reputations are at risk if they attend such concerts. That is not the case for television audiences, as women can participate from the safety of their homes. Television producers and advertisers see women as the main target audience, because they consider women the controllers of household finances and purchases. Disparaged as weepy [*I. cengeng*], the lyrics and vocal production of dangdut on television are designed to move women, to make them *baper*, be carried away with emotion. Producers attempt to harness the emotional power of dangdut to shape their audiences—to move women to behavior that is polite, loyal, deferential, and Islamic, and to avoid other behaviors, most notably drinking and promiscuity. Producers, many of whom are women, see in dangdut television an

opportunity to shape their audiences and to enact their aspirations for the future of Indonesia. Mobility, whether physical or metaphorical, marks women's lives in dangdut koplo.

Similarly, my own strategy is one of movement. I moved alongside women and in between networks, both offline and social media. I move between ethnographic and theoretical language and between the various disciplines and areas with which I am in conversation: Indonesian studies, Southeast Asian studies, Asian studies, ethnomusicology, popular music studies, voice studies, gender and sexuality studies, and anthropology of infrastructures, a list long enough that I have saved much of the relevant literature reviews for the chapters in which the topics are covered. The ethnographic moments woven through the narrative travel as women do, one moment in Kediri, the next in Surabaya, the next in Jakarta. I write in the first person because, although I am not the main character in this story, my relationships to the main characters were revelatory, uncomfortable points of friction and pleasure, and because dangdut koplo is “about bodies and bodily experience” (Wong 2019:1). The resonances—between bodies and bodies, bodies and drums, even between ambitions and experiences—were felt in my body and so are difficult to tease into any other language.

### **What is Dangdut? Dangdut Koplo?**

Dangdut. Just saying the word elicits a giggle in many circles, even in Indonesia. “You mean that tacky music with the little girls in fancy dresses? Do you really like that? It all sounds the same to me” from foreigners. From the educated Indonesian elite, “You know, don't you, that that music is for the lower class?” Yes. I know. Andrew Weintraub,



author of *Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music*, reports similar reactions from fellow music scholars: "In contrast to traditionalized objects of musicological study, dangdut was perceived as loud, aggressive, crass, derivative, inauthentic, and lacking creativity and imagination" (Weintraub 2010:15). A damning rejection indeed. Many of the criticisms from casual observers foreign and Indonesian alike, while ostensibly targeted at aesthetics, seemed to me to stem from scorn for women singers—women of presumed ill repute who, according to the stereotypes, use their bodies rather than their talent—and the lower-class listeners seen as too easily influenced by the eroticism of the music. Unlike *karawitan* or jazz, no one in Indonesia expected me to be interested in dangdut, and perhaps that was part of its appeal.

These attitudes stand in stark contrast with dangdut's overwhelming popularity. It dominates television, with more viewers than any show besides soap operas, and generates more income than any other music in Indonesia. On the island of Java, the music is omnipresent: its drumbeat pulses from homes, cars, neighborhood security posts, street vendor carts, restaurants, and clubs. It is the soundtrack of celebrations, holidays, and political campaigns.

Dangdut's musical genealogy is contested. Generally considered to be most strongly influenced by Hindi film music, dangdut was localized for Indonesian listeners with minor influences from the Melayu songs of Deli in North Sumatra,<sup>2</sup> Middle Eastern

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, Melayu songs are distinct from Malaysian songs. Lagu Melayu, or traditional Melayu songs, generally considered a shared heritage of the nations now called Malaysia and Indonesia, were a

orkes gambus, and British and US-American pop and rock. Various players emphasize different roots in order to make arguments about ownership and legitimacy. Rhoma Irama, the “King” of dangdut, argues for Melayu roots, though he does not point out a particular musical or lyrical element that is Melayu; rather, he insists dangdut has a Melayu sense, and thereby connects dangdut to a legitimizing Islamic kingdom (Weintraub 2010:33–34). The “Queen” of dangdut Elvy Sukaesih, as cited by Weintraub (2010:34), insists this is nonsense, and that the music draws more elements from India. Christian cab drivers in Surabaya told me the same thing: “Classic dangdut should be called dangdut India, you know.” To this day, dangdut koplo bands in East and Central Java go by the name *orkes Melayu* (OM) Monata, New Pallapa, New Kendedes, etc., referencing dangdut’s roots even though the koplo sound barely resembles the orkes Melayu of the 1940s and has fully supplanted it in practice.

The terms and history are contested, but dangdut’s sound is unmistakable. In many ways a dangdut band lineup resembles that of a rock band: two electric guitars, a keyboard, a drumkit, and an electric bass. While songs may draw musical elements from genres as varied as tango and reggae, three characteristics make a song unquestionably dangdut: the *kendang* (drum) and its characteristic rhythmic patterns; the *suling* (flute); and the singer’s use of a melismatic vocal technique called *cengkok*. In electronic dance

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song form based on the *pantun*, a four-line poetic form, in which professional women singers called *ronggeng* traded verses with men dancers, musicians, or audience members (Weintraub 2010:36; see also Goldsworthy 1979). The term *Orkes Melayu* emerged in the late 1930s (Weintraub 2010:40) to refer to groups that played Melayu songs harmonized by European instruments like piano, violin, and bass, as well as *gendang*. As Weintraub argues, *orkes Melayu* certainly had an influence on dangdut, but using the term *orkes Melayu* also makes an argument for the music’s ties to Islam and Indonesia. To this day, dangdut koplo groups in East Java maintain the prefix O.M. before their band name.

dangdut, using the characteristic rhythm of the kendang is sufficient to mark the song as dangdut. Of the three elements above, the kendang is the most important. Singer Nasha Aquila and her husband Paijo, kendang player for the orkes Melayu Pallapa, told me the following:

Paijo: In my opinion, dangdut is any music with the kendang—  
Nasha Aquila:—The kendang is the special characteristic—  
Paijo:—and if the way the kendang is played makes you want to dance [I. *joget*]

I was surprised to find that all my interlocutors in East Java referred to the dangdut drum as a kendang rather than a gendang; Andrew Weintraub uses the term gendang when describing dangdut drums (2010), and I was under the impression that the term kendang or kendhang was reserved for *karawitan*. However, everyone with whom I discussed dangdut koplo in East Java, from professional drum players like Paijo, Epep of New Kenedes, or the famed Ki Ageng Slamet, widely considered the best koplo kendang player, to kendang makers used the word kendang in writing and speaking. While both are referred to as kendang or gendang, the drums used in dangdut are quite different from those used in *karawitan* or other traditional music. The kendang of gamelan ensembles is two-headed, but dangdut kendang more closely resemble North Indian tabla. Although they are similar in sound and appearance, the dangdut kendang are made differently (see Figure 8). The bodies of both the *tak* drum (played by the right hand) and the *dut* drum (played with the left) are carved from whole pieces of wood; the *dut* is usually hollowed out, while the *tak* may or may not be. The head of the *tak* drum may be made from skin, rubber, or a combination of the two, while the head of the *dut* drum is usually made from skin. Dangdut koplo kendang are still most often made by small teams of crafters with

their own methods and materials, and so the processes, like the names, are not standardized.



*Figure 8: Paijo, the author, and the owner of Sombro Coffe, maker of some of the most sought-after kendang for dangdut koplo. September 2018.*

In performance, two or more of these kendang drums—a *tak*, a *dut*, and perhaps additional *tak* and *dut* as the performer likes—are placed in a stand (Figure 9) and set alongside a drumkit.



*Figure 9: Dangdut kendang on a stand. Purchased by the author in Sidoarjo, East Java, 2018.*

Dangdut koplo, a regional sub-genre of dangdut local to East and Central Java, is no less contested. It emerged in Surabaya in the mid-1990s, purportedly taking its name—koplo—from the feeling of taking hallucinogenic pills sold in the city’s nightclubs. In Javanese, koplo means stupid, dull-witted, simpleminded, or dim. Dangdut

koplo's sound, with a rapid drumbeat that doubles the standard dangdut drum rhythm in intensity, is often compared to a feeling of flying or being drunk [I. *mabuk*]. In the wake of the monetary crisis and political upheaval of the late 1990s, and the accompanying relaxation of censorship laws and a rapid diversification of music and video production, dangdut koplo spread.

Compared to what is now referred to as classic dangdut, dangdut koplo does feel like flying. As Andrew Weintraub describes, the standard dangdut drum pattern is doubled in koplo, with double the number of *dut* sounds in a measure, and often at a faster tempo (Weintraub 2013:168). In addition, the drummer improvises rhythmic patterns that give cues to singers and dancers, and in turn follows singers' movements and uses those patterns to highlight their dance moves, a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has watched performances of clown characters in Javanese theatre, *wayang wong*, *wayang kulit*, *reog*, or even *jaipongan* or *tayuban*. Both the speed and the subtle improvisation add an element of thrill and challenge to the music for both singers and listeners, who try to anticipate improvisatory movements and the accompanying dance moves. A koplo song usually begins with a pop sound as the singer performs one verse without the *kendang* rhythm, during which time the *kendang* player may instead play the drumkit. The *kendang* usually enters at the start of the first chorus or the second verse, creating a sense of wild excitement not unlike the drop of a beat in electronic dance music.

With this speed and improvisatory interest, live performance of dangdut koplo rushes the senses. The stage, often built in the middle of fields or neighborhoods, glows

with professional lights in many colors. The singers, freed from the elaborate *cengkok* of classic dangdut, seem to play on the stage, delivering jokes, casually dancing improvisationally, and interacting with the audience throughout their speechlike delivery of the song. The live crowd pulses with energy, sweating, sometimes drinking, always excited to dance or to hear their favorite singer. The band is larger than the standard dangdut set; in addition to the members described above, koplo groups add an extra keyboard, a tambourinist who also shouts out *senggakan*, sings, and dances, and an MC, whose duties include announcing the next singer, telling jokes, dancing and promoting a lively atmosphere, managing *saweran*, and policing unwanted behavior from audience members, like fistfights or harassment. Although dangdut koplo has spread to the mainstream through music videos and social media, live shows—and their significance as life-cycle events—keep dangdut koplo vibrant and innovative.

Live shows are also a source of controversy, however. Arguably, the root of the conflict over dangdut koplo came from the popularity of one singer. As Weintraub (2013) describes, VCDs videos of Inul Daratista's erotic "drill" [*I. ngebor*] dancing drew attention from television producers in 2003, setting off a national debate about eroticism, women's bodies, censorship, and the place of religion in governance. Rhoma Irama, the king of dangdut, declared that koplo was not dangdut (Weintraub 2013:161). The spectacle of Inul's body in performance was certainly not the first nor the most erotic scandal associated with women singers and dancers in Java, but it touched a nerve for Rhoma Irama: the question of who defines, owns, and controls genre. Once scholars and dangdut musicians alike debated whether dangdut koplo could truly be considered a sub-

genre or would be better described as a rhythmic treatment. Indeed, any song can easily be koplo-ized [I. *dikoplokan*] with a drum track. However, in the aftermath of the success of performers like Via Vallen and Nella Kharisma, it is undeniable that dangdut koplo has a unique repertoire and performance practice, qualifying it as a sub-genre in its own right.

Dangdut and koplo are thus contested terms. Most of my interlocutors refer to the music they make and enjoy as simply dangdut; when they use the term koplo, they refer to rhythmic treatment or form, or techniques of playing the kendang drum. However, when Jakartan music industry professionals talk about this music, many refuse to use the term dangdut at all and instead call it koplo. I choose to use the term dangdut generally, as my interlocutors do, and to specify dangdut koplo when distinguishing the practice of Central and East Java, the specific koplo rhythmic treatment, or the repertoire identified as dangdut koplo. Indeed, for most singers in East Java, debates over the purity of dangdut style are tangential to their involvement in it. They see koplo, classic, and indeed rock, pop, rap, reggae, and jazz, as tools they can use and styles they must be ready to perform upon request. Singers are expected to be proficient in both dangdut koplo and classic dangdut repertoires and singing styles, though they readily acknowledge that certain voices are more suited to classic dangdut, dangdut koplo, rock-dut, etc. Rather than assigning value to certain kinds of voices and styles, singers and bands rely on their various skills to satisfy the widest possible audience. Audiences regularly request classic dangdut, koplo, rock, reggae, pop, and *langgam jawa* repertoire at the same event, all covered in classic dangdut or koplo feel.



As part of the project of analyzing the forces that shape women's decisions in dangdut koplo, I also consider terminology and translation. There are many words for dangdut singers. First, the Indonesian word for singer, *penyanyi*, is formal and somewhat bureaucratic-sounding, and does not specify a specific music genre. Instead, dangdut koplo professionals most often referred to singers as *artis* or *biduanita*. *Biduanita* is the feminization of the word *biduan*, which means vocalist. By combining the word *biduan* with a word for woman [I. *wanita*], the term becomes gendered. In addition, the term *biduanita* is largely seen as dangdut-specific and carries negative connotations of cheapness or eroticism. *Artis*, the most common term, is taken from the English word artist, but has decidedly different connotations. On one hand, unlike the term *penyanyi*, *artis* denotes multiple talents and responsibilities. A dangdut koplo singer does not sit quietly onstage like a chanteuse; in addition to singing, she dances, banter with the band, MC, and audience, and accepts *saweran* (tips). She is expected to bring a full personality to the performance. At the same time, the term *artis* does not imply high status, formal training, or even talent, as the word artist in English does. *Artis*, then, is closer to “star” or “entertainment personality” in meaning. Finally, active fans often refer to singers as *idola*. Taken from K-pop fandom practices, which have swept through Indonesia and have crossover audiences especially among young women, “*idolaku*,” or “my idol” was a common way younger generations referred to their favorite singers. When writing in English, I will most often use the word singer to refer to women performers of dangdut koplo. However, these other terms will appear often, and I ask the reader to be aware that dangdut singers are not only providing vocals.

Dangdut koplo is only one part of a rich arts and cultural tapestry in Indonesia, in popular and traditional realms that span the sacred and secular as well as at least 1,340 recognized ethnic groups. Dangdut itself crosses these categories in sometimes uncomfortable ways, with many regional and linguistic variants in addition to dangdut koplo. It is also often identified as a traditional music by Indonesians, perhaps drawing a contrast with pop, rock, and other more clearly foreign-rooted genres, though music scholars unanimously refer to it as popular music. Questions of tradition and ownership are constants in discourse surrounding dangdut. As of 2021, the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and the Creative Economy—a name which makes explicit the industry’s acceptance of neoliberalism as a means to development—is attempting to promote dangdut as intangible world heritage to UNESCO, an effort which I will discuss further in the conclusion.

### **The Politicization of Dangdut and Recent Societal Transformation**

Dangdut has now existed for decades, and regionalization of the genre, as in dangdut koplo, is only one aspect of how political and cultural transformation and conflict have impacted dangdut. In the last century, Indonesia has shifted from colonized archipelago, nationalist Third World nation,<sup>3</sup> totalitarian nation-in-waiting, to today the world’s third largest democracy. These shifts have altered how people listen to and imagine popular music and culture. Dangdut has survived for fifty years through many of these shifts, emerging as one of the genres most identifiable with the archipelago.

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<sup>3</sup> I use this term to refer to Indonesia’s unaligned position during the Cold War. See Lee 2019.

Because of its longevity and popularity, dangdut is one of the fields on which debates about the future of Indonesia takes place. Commonly known as the music of the *rakyat*, or the common people, a phrase former President Sukarno often deployed to instill a sense of national character, the question of who owns and gets to shape and define dangdut is tied to questions about the nature of the people and the future of the nation. In discourse surrounding the music, competing ideologies and actors try to determine what the nation will be, the role of the state, the place of morality, the role of religion, and the infrastructure of everyday life. By exploring media and gender, I trouble common views of the *rakyat* and their relationship to media systems in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia.

The *rakyat* has been defined in many ways. Benedict Anderson writes that the *rakyat* has “no precise sociological contours, but implies a dichotomy—between *rakyat* and leader [I. *pemimpin*], the big man [I. *orang gede*] (1990:61). As Andrew Weintraub (2010:82) argues, the *rakyat* are framed differently depending on the era and stakes involved, alternatively disparaged by magazine and newspaper articles as *masih bodoh* (ignorant, nonleaders) and *kelas warkop* (a class of shiftless do-nothings who sit around drinking coffee, see Chapter 5 and the glossary) or valorized as “innocent, morally superior, economically unprivileged but politically sovereign figures who often suffer from injustice inflicted by the rich and powerful” (Heryanto 1999:163).

The *rakyat* has been tied to both national identity and mass media in Indonesia since at least Independence, which President Sukarno declared on the radio, earning Indonesia the nickname the microphone republic, Sukarno the people’s tongue [I.

*peyambung lidah rakyat*] (McDaniel 1994:214–5, see also Anderson 1990:61–62).

Sukarno leveraged this connection throughout his presidency. As James T. Siegel writes, “with the achievement of independence, President Sukarno claimed to speak for the people in continuing revolution [...] a great many thought that their president spoke for them” (Siegel 1998:3–4). At the same time, this representation was illiberal, as Benedict Anderson argues, less an extension of the people’s actual will than an amassing of their power in a single individual (Anderson 1990:62). During the New Order government of 1966–1998, Siegel argues, the *rakyat* were no longer valorized, instead considered potentially dangerous and criminal. “‘The people’ became merely a term of reference; it was no longer a term of address, as it had been when Sukarno spoke to them in their own name” (Siegel 1998:4).

I argue that conceptions of the *rakyat* are gendered. As Saskia Wieringa points out, nationalist projects like the one on which Indonesia was founded are “built on masculine institutions and exhibit masculine activities” (2003:71), while women’s participation is both marginalized and overlooked. Similarly, Anne McClintock writes, “All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous” (McClintock 1995:353). The “We” of nation-building and citizenship is male; “Not only are the needs of the nation here identified with the frustrations and aspirations of men, but the representation of male national power depends on the prior construction of gender difference” (McClintock 1995:535). This was certainly true of the people to whom and for whom President Sukarno spoke; while he supported women’s organizations as part of nationalist efforts, Wieringa writes that his vision for women was clearly as a supporting

role: “women’s anticolonial activities had only been tolerated because they could be associated with women’s motherly qualities in giving birth to the nation and with the state’s preferred model of wifhood, wherein women were faithful companions to their warrior-husbands” (Wieringa 2003:74).

The events of 1965–66 firmly planted the idea of abject or politically organized women as sexually deviant and dangerous. When marginalized women are spoken of, they are most likely to be sex workers, dangdut singers, etc., women who stand apart from the poor but relatively innocent *rakyat*. At the same time, poor women who work hard and aspire to class mobility are more likely to be classed *up* in common discourse and seen as more inherently virtuous. Ariel Heryanto argues that “women play a significant role within the growing identity politics of the middle class and Muslim elite,” class and religious categories not otherwise inherently gendered (Heryanto 1990:163). Women remain a marked category, part of the *rakyat* but not their main representation.

Because dangdut is the music genre most associated with the *rakyat*, conceptions of its audience share similarly complex interconnections. Andrew Weintraub writes, “the ways in which dangdut has been articulated with the multiple and shifting meanings of the *rakyat* can help us understand how mass-mediated popular music has been instrumental in constructing the nature and function of ‘the people’ in modern Indonesia” (2010:83). In this work, I add to the understandings presented by Weintraub by exploring the *rakyat*’s gendered meanings, the ways discourse about moral responsibility [I. *tanggung jawab moral*] among women music and television producers continues to frame the *rakyat* as needing guidance, and how women singers and fans push back against such

narratives. Significantly, social media has in the last ten years altered the relationships between culture industries and audiences. Singers depend less than they ever have before on Jakarta studios and have more power than ever to shape their own image through social media. For regional singers of dangdut koplo, their interactions often reflect class solidarity instead of the top-down approach of celebrities speaking to the rakyat. On the other side, dangdut fans use social media to communicate with radio and television stations, where producers, directors, DJs, and MCs obsessively monitor likes and requests on Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp even as they dismissively refer to their audiences as “the middle class and below” [I. *kelas menengah ke bawah*].

Women are powerful actors in this debate who actively shape media and policy (and not always in ways I would consider aligned with gender or social class equality). However, women’s bodies are also the site of conflict in moral panics about sexuality and erotics as well as debates about the role of religion in public life. Thus, the figures of the singing and dancing women who today are dangdut’s most visible feature are often erased or tempered. For example, in the famous music video “Dangdut is the Music of my Country” by Project Pop, women are almost entirely absent, replaced with a brotherhood of male rockers celebrating the camaraderie created by dangdut as a palliative for the ills of ethnic conflict. In this music video, dangdut’s power is acknowledged and admired, but the figures of women singers, who would taint the scene with their power and eroticism, are erased. This vision is much like what Jeremy Wallach sees in live concerts of the music when he argues that its “ideological positioning as a distinctively ‘Indonesian’ music ‘close to the people’ evokes an inclusive social vision

that constitutes a populist alternative to both the Soeharto era's hegemonic ideology of 'development' and the exclusivist, moralistic rhetoric of Indonesian radical Islamists" (Wallach 2014:272). Wallach rightly points out that this discourse leaves out women, as "the nation resembles the dangdut audience in that both are idealized fraternities of males" (2014:281). However, Wallach and other scholars likewise leave women out of the narrative when they focus on men in the audience rather than the women onstage, backstage, and in front of television and smartphone screens, who both contest and embrace populist narratives surrounding dangdut.

Through close ethnography, I hope to here reveal an alternative story about dangdut's audience and creators, one that centers women as creatives, artists, directors, and active listeners, neither abject nor elite, neither exploited nor empowered, but enacting their own goals and visions given their circumstances.

### **Gendered Media Systems and Television as National Cultural Project**

One rich issue that emerged as I traveled with singers and hung out backstage at TV studios was the ways in which media systems reflect gender and social class ideologies, both in content and use. I here follow Steven Feld's call to attend to uneven cosmopolitanisms by "listening to histories of listening" (Feld 2012: 7). As described in Chapter 4, women make up at least half of dangdut's television audience, but a much smaller percentage of the audience at off-air events (depending on the event). Television producers, many of whom are women, target women with their content because they believe women hold more household economic control. As a result, dangdut on television and off-air dangdut koplo are markedly different practices.

Indonesian television was framed as a nationalist project from its beginning in 1962, when President Sukarno introduced Televisi Republik Indonesia, or TVRI, under his direct control in the runup to the Fourth Asian Games (Kitley 2002:97). The New Order government used television to further advance its goals of converting the people to the goals of the state, even going so far as to ban advertising on television in 1981 to prevent any possible conflict of interest. Controlled directly by President Suharto and his ministry bureaucrats, television was cut off from broader social or economic interests and influences. Dissatisfied, by the mid-1980s people had turned to pirated video cassette tapes for a broader spectrum of entertainment. Twenty-one unique regulations and decrees were set forth between 1983 and 1987 to police video import and reproduction, but eventually the government introduced five tightly policed commercial channels (Kitley 2002:102–103).

Changing attitudes towards dangdut on television reflected changing attitudes of the state toward the music. TVRI refused to promote dangdut through most of the 1980s and placed a dangdut quota on its musical programs (Weintraub 2010:151). As privatized television emerged in the late 1980s, dangdut programming surged. While Weintraub argues that increased visibility on television caused dangdut's increasing popularity, I argue that relationship likely was mutually constitutive; already existing public demand and liberalizing television production and distribution coincided to promote dangdut to new circles, in particular the upper middle class and educated elite.

Regardless of causes, the demand for dangdut exploded during the early 1990s, and musical programs began to ignore and sidestep quotas; according to *Tempo*, by 1991



the official rules at TVRI stipulated only thirty percent of music programming could be dangdut, but in reality dangdut made up seventy-five percent of music programming (Pudyastuti 1992). These early shows took a variety of formats, from music videos to dangdut dramas—soap operas that would use dangdut songs to make their emotional point. TPI, now called MNC or MNCTV, was the first channel to produce a dangdut singing competition show in 2005, following in the steps of the newly internationally popular television format (*American Idol* began three years earlier, *Pop Idol* four years earlier). In dangdut singing competitions, with their mandatory focus on singing instead of dancing, producers saw a new opportunity for boosting the prestige of dangdut among the middle class while still catering to the tastes of the majority. They could bring dangdut out of the club, out of Pantura, and onto the national stage as a uniquely Indonesian music embraced by everyone.

Though dangdut's use of Indonesian as the language and its popularity gave it advantages, the national embrace of dangdut was not a foregone conclusion. In addition to the social class stigma the music faced, it had grown up in Jakarta and Java and had only limited listenership in outlying islands, especially in Eastern Indonesia. Yet its position as the music of the people—the *rakyat*—gave it an advantage. As Weintraub points out, press of the early 1990s lauded dangdut's popularity and potential to unify the nation:

The story went something like this: sung in lyrics that nearly all Indonesians could understand, expressing feelings that everyone could relate to, and with a beat that everyone could dance to, it was natural that dangdut had become iconic with the nation. As a result, dangdut's representation and meaning changed from the music of ordinary people who occupy the bottom of the social and political

system, to a genre celebrated as national music in the 1990s. (Weintraub 2010:149)

In some ways, the commentary made sense. Indonesia, made up of thirty-four ethnic groups, somewhere between 16,000 and 18,000 islands, and seven hundred living languages, a musical genre that used a regional language was unlikely to represent the nation. Beyond the language barrier, regional music forms were sometimes unintelligible for lay listeners in other regions. On the other hand, Indonesian pop and rock were seen as too foreign-influenced and distant from the *rakyat* to serve. Despite its many foundational influences, dangdut was and is uniquely Indonesian, sung in the national language, and relatively easy to dance to, if not to sing or play. Dangdut was thus in many ways a natural choice for the national cultural project, albeit one that faced stigma.

Since the fall of the New Order, dangdut as grassroots practice and dangdut as national cultural project have come into conflict. In many contexts, this conflict can be traced to incompatibility between television's purpose and practice as defined under the New Order, and the fact that many current television professionals trained or were educated under that system, and commercial television's mandate to appeal to advertisers and make money. As shown by both Gita and Ika's accounts in Chapter 5, which discusses women as producers, MCs, and DJs, remnants of New Order discourse still exist in broadcasting, mainly in directives about moral responsibility to protect audiences from immoral influences, especially those that encourage drunkenness, promiscuity, or violence. When applied to dangdut, this often is interpreted as protecting dangdut's audience—the *rakyat*—from dangdut itself.

Dangdut television attempts to mold dangdut practice into an acceptable national symbol. Kitley defines the Indonesian national cultural project as “a range of state-sponsored and -directed activities designed to legitimate symbolically Indonesian national cultural identity” (2000:3). While dangdut television shows are no longer directly overseen by the government, nationalist goals still influence decisions through censorship and regulatory boards as well as the internalization of New Order modernization and social class ideologies. Gender and social class ideologies thus contend against each other in the sphere of media systems to ask: What should the future of the Indonesian people be? And, in particular, what type of woman should represent them?

### **Women’s Involvement in Dangdut Koplo Industries**

It is in this wider context of competing forces and ideologies that I center women’s lives in dangdut koplo. While much has been written about dangdut, only a few studies have centered the experience of women performers, and, as far as I know, nothing has been written about women fans, managers, MCs, and the myriad other significant roles women play. In a genre stereotyped as eroticized and exploitative, women hold many of the reins: as singers deciding how to use their bodies and in what contexts; as managers deciding who to hire and why; as producers determining what gets shown on television; and as fans picking and choose who and what to listen to and watch.

In considering women’s lives in dangdut koplo, I answer the call of Sandra Niessen, Ann Maria Leshkovich, and Carla Jones to examine the roles and experiences of intermediate players in globalizing contexts. I focus neither on abjectness nor

superstardom, instead attending to women of regional fame and success, women who are still striving to maintain careers, women who represent the experience of the majority of women in dangdut koplo industries. “Instead of voiceless victims or powerful agents, these are people who are betwixt and between” (Niessen, Leshkovich, and Jones 2003:31), facing difficult situations and choosing how to surmount them. This is in an effort to avoid painting women as localized victims.

Much of previous academic literature about singers of dangdut koplo has focused on the question of whether the practice is empowering or exploitative. This is not unique to dangdut koplo; as Rambo et al. explain, sociological studies of women’s performance practices that are stigmatized as erotic or exotic often use similar dichotomies: “deviant, exploited, liberated, or both exploited and liberated” (Rambo et al. 2006:214). Such frames demonstrate more about researchers’ prejudices than they reveal about women’s experiences or motivations.

In her dissertation about dangdut *tarling*, a regional sub-genre of dangdut in West Java, Sandra Bader rightly eschews this binary, but gestures towards another: being voiceless/giving a voice. Like Bader, I value women’s voices and center their discourses about themselves over discourse society places onto them. However, I also recognize that society is multi-faceted, that singers are always adapting their behavior in response to varied discourse about them, and that singers are often complicit in spreading stigma when they put down other singers or frame themselves as superior to others. Similarly, I disagree with the notion that my research gives singers a voice, maintaining that the belief that singers are at all voiceless has much in common with the idea that they are

exploited; both viewpoints are based in stigma which considers erotic work to be tainted or immoral. Dangdut koplo and dangdut tarling are quite different, both musically and socially; perhaps Bader writes of giving voice to singers because singers of dangdut tarling are more disenfranchised than singers of dangdut koplo. Many singers of dangdut koplo, however, have their own powerful voices—both musical and discursive through their social media platforms—which they leverage on their own terms for profit, power, and even social justice. Any voice I can give them that they do not already possess is extremely limited, mostly to academic readers. To most singers, I was nothing beyond my body and interest in the music: a young blonde foreigner who could be paraded out for viral videos. The idea that I could give a voice to professional performers with more than 500,000 Instagram followers privileges certain readers/listeners (read: academics) as more significant than the millions reached, not only by the performer's singing, but by her self-presentation on social media. Thus, my work is meant to address scholarship about gender in Indonesia and in dangdut, not to represent everything these women are.

### **The Main Characters**

Women in dangdut koplo are the figures at the center of my analysis. The dominant figure is, of course, the singer herself. While I owe a debt of gratitude to many other fascinating people and friends, a few singers and industry professionals appear again and again in this dissertation. Most of them are women who achieved regional success—not the most successful, but those who hustled to create a name for themselves in East and Central Java. They selected me as much as I selected them by being available

and open to my questions and the inconvenience I imposed. They are the main characters in this work.

Nasha Aquila and her husband Paijo live in Sidoarjo. She is a singer of mid-range success in East and Central Java, and he is a kendang player who lovingly supports her career. In 2017–2018, both were in their early thirties. They opened their home to me on many occasions, let me travel with them, lent me makeup and clothing, fed me, and tried to coach me on singing, dancing, and behavior. Nasha saw an opportunity in me, and we developed a symbiotic relationship of sorts. I peppered her with questions and did the uncomfortable work of shining a light on someone else’s life, while she saw me—my foreignness, youth, and novelty—as a way to further stand out (Figure 10).



*Figure 10: Nasha Aquila at a rehearsal in Sidoarjo. Photo by the author.*

Lenny is a television host on the show *Stasiun Dangdut* (see Figure 11). She began her career as a singer but switched to more stable work as an MC after a series of career disappointments. In 2018 she was in her mid-forties and had a young adult son and a recent divorce. She was very generous with her time, and we spent many hours eating together after broadcasts of *Stasiun Dangdut*. Lenny is a loyal and honest friend, and the one person who would reliably get more requests for selfies with strangers than I did.



*Figure 11: Yuli's Orkes Melayu Arka Musik at Stasiun Dangdut. Yuli is center in the red and green hijab, her daughter Alice by her side in the black hat. Lenny, wearing a white blouse, is standing next to Alice.*

Yuli, also known by her stage name, Bunda Pelangi, and her daughter Alice (Figure 11) were likewise very generous with their time and energy. Yuli began her career as a singer and used the money she earned to go to college, support her daughter,

and start her own band and production company. In 2018 Yuli was in her late thirties or early forties. Her daughter Alice had just turned eighteen. Their home in Trawas was always open to me.

Rere Amora is another singer, a native of Surabaya, who rose to regional success with the band OM Monata (Figure 12). During my field research, she was in her early to mid twenties. When I traveled with Monata, I bunked with her, rode in the vehicle with her, and dressed and got ready for shows with her. We bonded over shared love of horror movies and 90s Bollywood. Since my field research, she has gotten married and had a child.





*Figure 12: Rere Amora sings a duet with Sodiq accompanied by the band O.M. Monata, Pati, Central Java, June 2018. Photo by the author.*

Ika is a radio DJ and music director at Radio Wijaya, a dangdut radio station in Surabaya. While studying literature at Universitas Airlangga in Surabaya, she got an internship at Radio Wijaya, and after graduating, she was offered a job. She has worked consistently at Radio Wijaya since 2007 and is now in her mid-thirties (Figure 13).



*Figure 13: Ika (left) in Radio Wijaya's studio with the author.*

Many other people—women, industry professionals, and fellow scholars—were indispensable to me during my research and in the years since, but, for one reason or another, do not appear as main or recurring characters in this story. I have expressed my significant debt of gratitude to them in the acknowledgements of this work.

### **Framing**

If aspiration, desire, shame, reputation, labor, and movement are the connecting threads in my analysis, and women the primary figures, sacrifice, pleasure, and power are three recurring topics. These topics came naturally from discussions and interviews with women and participant observation and are addressed in extensive existing scholarship.

In particular, questions of gender and power in Java, which have been hotly debated for many years, shaped my inquiry. Chapter 1 includes an extensive literature review—written in the form of an argument—exploring gender in Java in general and the archetype of women who sing and dance for audiences of mostly men. By showing the through lines between other dance forms and dangdut koplo, as well as the competing narratives about women, gender, and power introduced by various actors over the last few hundred years, I position women as agents making an argument about their position in the world in the face of stereotypes and limitations. My analysis thus attends to discourses of labor, aspiration, and mobility that permeate women’s activities in dangdut koplo and their emergent socio-economic positions. Aspiration for economic mobility, physical mobility, and visibility, with the underlying theoretical belief, following Ward Keeler, that aesthetic practices and the social lives that surround them both “develop out of deeply held assumptions about the world” (Keeler 1987:18). I argue that women’s lives in dangdut koplo both reveal and counter formal narratives about gender and labor stemming from religion, custom [I. *adat*], and government alike.

For this research, I draw on my home discipline of ethnomusicology, our neighbors dance studies, popular music studies, performance studies, and media and cultural studies, as well as the wealth of scholarship in Indonesian and Southeast Asian studies. Within ethnomusicology, I contribute to scholarship considering women’s experiences and roles as musicians and tastemakers. In the decades since Ellen Koskoff’s seminal edited text (1987), ethnomusicologists have offered a wealth of theory and examples for considering the intersections between gender, sexuality, and musical

performance and enjoyment. I expand this inquiry in six main directions: erotics and desire; voice and resonance; gendered media systems; fandom studies; women in mid-level industry and backstage roles as producers, managers, DJs, and MCs; and attention to processes of globalization and heritage.

In my analysis and framing, I owe a great debt to Deborah Wong's call to attend to erotics to move past the violence of imperialist and colonial views of bodies, gender, and sexuality (2015:182–185). Wong defines erotics as both material and immaterial, “the place where the affective and the structural come together and where corporeal control is felt and made visible” (Wong 2015:179). In attending to erotics, I follow other ethnomusicologists whose careful ethnography and remarkable attention to sexuality and desire reveal resonances between bodies, especially Joshua Pilzer (2012), Eileen Hayes (2010), and Gillian Roger (2010) and Gregory Barz (2006). Like Gregory Barz writes (2006:1), and as I believe all these scholars would agree, although I am an ethnomusicologist, the music is not my primary motivation. Rather, it is the stories of people. For all the women described here, musical practice and desires are inextricable from one another.

One might argue that the erotics of dangdut koplo are impossible to ignore. Much of the literature about dangdut deals with the spectacle of women's bodies, the desires of men in the audiences, and moral panics surrounding sensuous dance moves. As I describe above, the pull of the drumbeat, the thrill of properly executing a *senggakan* with the rest of the audience, and the calm, clear command of the singer all formed an addiction for me. The erotics are audible; women moan and squeal, and the lyrics reference sex

through barely-concealed metaphors of food and heat. But are the erotics of dangdut really so clear? Erotics are not limited to or by sexuality, after all. While the desiring male audiences have found multiple expressions as assumed subjects, the desires of women singers and fans are largely invisible, erased by discourse about dangdut as well as the women themselves, who have a vested interest in making their desires deniable onstage and invisible off. When I speak of dangdut desires, I acknowledge erotic desire for the singer, but also listen for the unstated desires at play: the power plays between men in the audience described by Henry Spiller (2010); the women fans who sigh passionately at a particularly beautiful turn of phrase and the tragic lyrics that accompany it; the myriad of musicians and managers desiring more fame, money, security, and opportunity; myself, desiring to understand the sounds, stories, and resonances; and all of us together, feeling the pull to dance and forget our troubles.

As I will discuss below, my home discipline of ethnomusicology encourages participation in music practices. As Anne K. Rasmussen explains, commitment to studying music with music practitioners makes researchers legible and demonstrates long-term investment in music and culture (2004:175), and is also a method for revealing aspects of performance unseen or unheard by those who do not play along, so to speak. I came to this research as a singer, and because of my age, gender, and appearance, I was further pushed into that role by my interlocutors. I thus consider problems of voices, bodies, and resonances in approaching both how singers constitute their own image and how women listeners respond and participate in that process. I follow Marié Abe as considering resonance as “an analytical lens that brings together the production of space

and sound” (2018:27). By considering the vibrations implied by framing voices and listening through resonance, I attend to multiple vibrations between bodies, constituted by how singers physiologically manipulate their anatomy to achieve a desired impact, how the emotions they feel translate over sound, sight, and other sensation, and how listeners interpret such feelings even when sensed through mass mediated spaces of the television set. Veit Erlmann further contends that resonance is useful for questioning “the binary of the materiality of things and the immateriality of signs that has been at the center of Western thought for much of the modern ear” (Erlmann 2015:181). My line of inquiry is also influenced by Steven Feld, Aaron A. Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels, who posit the voice as “among the body’s first mechanisms of difference” (2004:341), a site where human beings first recognize the self from the other and so begin to construct identity.

I connect voice and resonance to empathy, following Nina Sun Eidsheim and Katherine Meizel’s hope of “understanding voice’s role in how human connections are forged” (2019:xxvii). This is most significant in Chapter 4, in which I discuss women listeners and viewers of dangdut singing competition television. Dangdut listening practices are deeply divided by gender, and so I explore both how producers and singers use their own “imaginative empathy” (Abe 2018:31) for women in the audience to shape the performance in a way that will appeal to them.

I also contribute to scholarship about how media systems are gendered. Continuing Weintraub’s (2010) analysis of dangdut television in the 1990s, I discuss how women’s fandom shapes dangdut television. Although norms are changing, Indonesian

women, especially young women, are discouraged from participating in the late-night, open-air shows that dominate off-air dangdut koplo practice. To enjoy the music and express their fandom, women turn to wildly popular dangdut television shows, creating gendered listening practices that shape television, advertising, and leisure in Indonesia. In Chapters 4 and 5 and the Conclusion, I discuss how the impacts of New Order centralization of mass media continue to resonate in dangdut singing competition television. Inspired by Katherine Meizel's discussion of singing competition reality television and political ideology (2011), I show how social media reveals the previously private voice of the women's *rakyat* and serves as a public sphere for women to discuss democracy, voting, and justice. I also show how singers use social media to control their own images and avoid the control of Jakarta-based talent agencies. Going viral is the new standard of success, resulting in a transformation in how audiences view singers, how singers create and publicize content, and how koplo industries measure success.

In addition to the impacts of media, I also explore the somewhat rarer phenomenon of young women dangdut koplo fan club members. These women travel to see shows and often become informal assistants to singers or band management. I consider how their fandom is both encouraged and devalued by the industry, drawing on Kristen Busse's analysis of the connections between labors of love and women in capitalist societies (2015). Young women see fan clubs as opportunities for social and economic capital but are pushed into gendered fan labor and suffer stigma for participating.



Finally, I highlight women's production, technical, and managerial roles in dangdut koplo. Little has been written of women as producers, managers, DJs, sound technicians, or any of the many roles necessary for creating music behind the scenes. In many fields and locations, this is partly shaped by their conspicuous absence from technical and decision-making roles. This is not the case in dangdut koplo, where one is as likely to see a woman as a man in management and production positions. At least half of the decision makers I met in dangdut koplo industries were women—producers, managers, MCs, radio music directors, etc.—compared with absolutely abysmal numbers in the United States, Western Europe, and Australia. “In the UK, the Fawcett Society's annual Sex and Power (2013) audit report indicates that there is not a single female Chair or Chief Executive of a Television company; men outnumber women by more than 10 to 1 in decision-making roles in media companies” (Conor et al. 2015:5). Research on music recording industries was relatively rare until recent decades (Frith 2007; Hennion 1989), and studies about women's work in the industry in any role besides singer remain sparse. Paula Wolfe points out, “the attention paid to the female recordist has often been limited to noting her under-representation [...] the impact of the under-representation of women working specifically in the field of music production—whether as music producers or as artist-producers—has been under-researched” (Wolfe 2019:5). Several studies of creative industries claim that myths of meritocracy prevent creative industries from promoting diversity in hiring practices (Strong and Raine 2018; Gadir 2017; Taylor and O'Brian 2017), and studies of women in decision-making and technical roles tend to focus on discrimination and lack (Sandstrom 2000; McCartney 2003).



Dangdut koplo industries pose an opportunity to investigate gender and music production. My research shows women's are present in higher numbers and have more agency in decision-making and technical roles in dangdut koplo industries compared to the studies above. Of course, women in production roles are not a catch-all palliative for gender discrimination; the stories I explore show instead women with competing ideologies, goals, backgrounds, and preferences. In Chapter 5, I offer the experiences of seven koplo industry professionals who explain their career choices in their own words. I show how each individual woman moves through intersecting media structures, how national television and radio structures interact with social media and on-the-ground experience to shape how lives are lived and careers made. I hope that Chapter 5 will lay the groundwork for future research on women's work in music industries.

### **My Subject Positions**

Beyond my role as a researcher and writer, I am a desiring woman with my own story of leaving home, my own call to move and be moved by the musics around me. My arrival story, though shaped by my love of music, is equally tied to my own desire for socio-economic mobility in my home nation and through my chosen career. Like the singers with whom I traveled, ate, celebrated, and cried, when I step onto the stage I do so because of a driving desire to escape precarity, a desire just as powerful as the pleasure I take in the music.

This hunger to establish myself comes for me in dialogue with my home cultures. Raised in a conservative religion that discouraged women from holding any kind of employment outside the home and taught them their bodies were inherently shameful, I

reacted with a determination to prove I could provide for myself, and, in the same breath, to prove my desires were warranted and just. I did not recognize at the time that I'd traded one master, a patriarchal god, for another, the god capitalism.

Perhaps singers fascinated me because I recognized in them that same hunger and tension. Called by love of music, the pleasure of performance, and the promise of mobility, singers face social stigma that is partly religious—focused on their immodesty—and partly socio-economic—focused on how singers represent the opposite of the principle *ikhlas*—a Sufi-derived term for enlightened disinterest—by openly seeking money.

Before embarking on formal research, I had already spent nearly six months in Java studying Indonesian. I therefore had some experience with the first impression people tended to take of me there. As a young, petite, white, blonde woman who appears and sometimes behaves younger than my years, I knew that responses towards me tended toward infantilization and assumptions about promiscuity based on Hollywood movies and the behavior of tourists in Bali. White privilege opens many doors for researchers in Indonesia, but I knew that the cost, for me, would likely be being brought out for events as a spectacle. I would certainly be expected to sing in public often.



Figure 14: The author at one of her first concerts with Monata in Central Java. Sodiq is center, the author to the left, Rere Amora to the right. Nasha Aquila is on the end in a white top. Photo by Nanang Rivaldi, taken with the author's camera and used with permission.

Over more than a year of fieldwork in 2015 and 2017–2018, primarily in East and Central Java, I spent much of my time learning to embody this role. I can't say I was successful at my efforts (Figure 14). In the field of ethnomusicology, it's common to study and attempt to master the genre of music studied. In my case, there is no formal process for studying dangdut singing. Singers teach themselves by ear, imitating what they hear on recordings [I. *otodidak*]. Outside Jakarta's glitzy singing competition shows, singing lessons are all but unheard of. I thus had to attempt to learn *otodidak* as well, but without the time or cultural frame of reference most singers have. I tried to study as well using kinesthetic empathy from other singers and with a few isolated pieces of advice. I never achieved even passable dangdut singing technique, and the near complete absence

of rehearsals meant that most of my learning took place onstage in front of hundreds or thousands of patient spectators.

Nor was I able to find a consistent teacher for the kendang, the dangdut drum. The most famous and well-established players were too busy to teach, and less-established players seemed to fear retribution or accusations of stepping outside of the hierarchy. Gender also played a role here, as men hesitated to be alone with me and generally didn't take my desire seriously. The few women players were likewise too busy touring. I took a few informal lessons from Paijo, drummer and husband of Nasha Aquila, but once again I found myself, along with countless other aspiring dangdut musicians, studying through YouTube videos and smartphone applications.

Despite my lack of prowess with dangdut technique, white privilege and good contacts granted me entree into professional dangdut circles. My gender and youth solidified the role I would take, and, to a certain degree, determined my access. I was treated like an aspiring singer (Figure 15). I moved with other singers. I was also largely cut off from musicians, as singers in dangdut koplo avoid spending too much time with band members, as doing so opens them up to criticism about being sexually promiscuous.



*Figure 15: The author in performance at UNESA in South Surabaya. Photo courtesy of the Jawa Pos.*

I knew before arriving that this would likely be the case and structured my research plan accordingly. I also had a theoretical motivation for taking this position. I placed myself at the feet of women performers, not only among them, but as the least among them, to avoid what Shiovitz describes, interpreting Judith Butler (1999), as researchers viewing “the performance space as a safe zone to scrutinize the dejected” (Shiovitz 2019:5). Singers are often viewed as dejected or marginalized by wealthy Indonesians and foreigners alike, but though they suffer stigma, they are skilled experts with extensive experience, many since they were children, and are thus worthy of being centered and respected as such.

## **A Methodology of Movement**

In Java, the dangdut scene is nearly everywhere and all at once. Dangdut music is ubiquitous in East Java, and nearly everyone I met had a strong opinion about the music. In addition, dangdut singers and bands travel constantly, and fans travel to see them. Most significantly, listeners also participate through television, radio, and social media in the privacy of homes, cars, cafés, or workplaces. I find still that I am always entering in the middle of a conversation about dangdut that is always already happening in and between offline experience, mass media, and social media. Because of this, I conceptualized—and indeed, still conceptualize, as the conversation has not ended—my methodology as hybrid ethnography, as Liz Przybylski writes, in which I am only one of many people and systems doing the documenting:

Hybrid ethnographers must prepare for a role change in which we are not the only people who record social interaction; this involves a conceptual shift. When interpreting media in the hybrid field, researchers contend with content that was made by participants, including ourselves (Przybylski 2020:6).

This shift in conceptualization does not only change how I think of other participants and how I do my documenting. As Przybylski writes, it also transforms my view of myself into but yet another participant in a scene, and a somewhat less capable participant at that. My field, then, is multi-sited, playing out on the roads that run through East and Central Java, and hybrid, as singers and I check social media and livestream to fans from the back seats of vehicles. I draw from and contribute to methodologies from anthropology of infrastructures and social media and visual ethnography in addition to participant observation among singers, industry professionals, and fans.

Infrastructures like roads and media systems are integral to stories of dangdut

koplo. Although anthropology has only recently turned its attention to infrastructure as an object of study, excellent work has already been done on roads, focusing both on their influence in their locales (Harvey 2012) and on the networks, political, bureaucratic, and technical, that call them into being (Mrázek 2002). Brian Larkin writes of media when he says, media “facilitate and direct transnational flows of cultural goods and the modes of affect, desire, fantasy and devotion these goods provoke” (Larkin 2008:2), yet the parallels between media and roads are undeniable here. In my exploration of how roads and media both facilitate movement for women in dangdut koplo, I analyze how infrastructures “emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy” in addition to their technical function (Larkin 2013:329). I traveled along the roads with singers, listened to their debates about which road to take, or how useful the new toll road might be, and attended to interactions along the road. I also conducted research at television and radio studios, interviewed producers, MCs, and DJs, watched a lot of dangdut singing competition television, and followed the social media conversations about all of the above. I use close reading to analyze some media as text, but I also draw many conclusions from experiences watching with others and talking to other audience members.

As an ethnomusicologist, this fits well with disciplinary ideas of participant observation, which often include making music and striving to be capable as performers of the music we study. Sometimes called bi-musicality—a term coined by Mantle Hood (1960)—the idea is that “bi-musicality can operate as a learning strategy, a strategy that not only leads to musical skills but to understanding people making music. Bi-musicality

[...] when practiced deliberately and reflectively, constantly rubs us up against musical differences that make a cultural difference” (Titon 1995:289). This was certainly true in my case, as I discuss above. In addition, because processes of music-making were on the road and projected through mass and social media, participant observation allowed me to see the tensions, frictions, and desires played out there.

Social media is impossible to separate from offline lives in dangdut koplo. Social media is part of how singers and fans build and project their own identities, and, in practice, my methodology was constantly hybrid. René T.A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay, Jr. (2003) make a deliberate argument for the value of considering technology as part of ethnography. “The ethnographic Other is now fully plugged in,” they write, “and the ethnomusicologist is no longer the only person in the field with high-tech equipment” (2003:2). Attending to the use of technology, they argue, reveals different types of social configurations. This position is now easily accepted, and ethnography of online space and interactions is increasingly commonplace (Nardi 2010). As Sarah Pink argues, “We should engage with the internet where it is part of the visual cultures, everyday lives and particular practices that our research focuses on as, in many cultural, social and regional research contexts the internet will already be part of the lives of people who participate in projects with us” (Pink 2003:124). Social media in particular is a rich space to observe identity formation, as Sherry Turkle predicted, “the eroding of boundaries between the real and virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self” (Turkle 1995:10). I learned quickly in the field that pointing my equipment towards “the notes” was a fruitless endeavor, since entire production teams already worked to record the



highest quality sound and the concert stage from the best angles. Instead, I learned, we singers were engaged in the work of creating and broadcasting identity.

For dangdut singers, social media has become a primary site of control and projection of identities. Yes, bands, artists, and television show accounts all share professionally-produced content on their social media. But artists also share content that is not primarily artistic. Singers present and perform multiple aspects of themselves as they move between different in-person and social media contexts. In the last decade, they have begun to utilize social media platforms as tools of representation, giving them a voice to counter stigma that views them as greedy, sexually corrupt, and of low socio-economic status, and granting control over their image that was once the purview of Jakarta record labels.

Fans engage directly with such content, connecting with and critiquing artists directly on their social media accounts, requesting songs on the radio, criticizing television shows and personalities. What's more, producers and DJs watch these feeds and respond in real time. Fans are also artists and tastemakers. Through smartphone apps like Smule, fans create their own virtual duets with superstars and each other. The smartphone applications Instagram and WhatsApp are the primary sites of dangdut social media participation, but I also analyzed interactions on YouTube and Facebook. On Instagram, the most direct site of performer/fan interaction, I draw from Pink's methodology of visual ethnography (Pink 2013) to consider not only how others are making images but following Edgar Gómez Cruz (2011) to consider how I myself as an ethnographer produce and share images in the ethnographic process. As a photographer

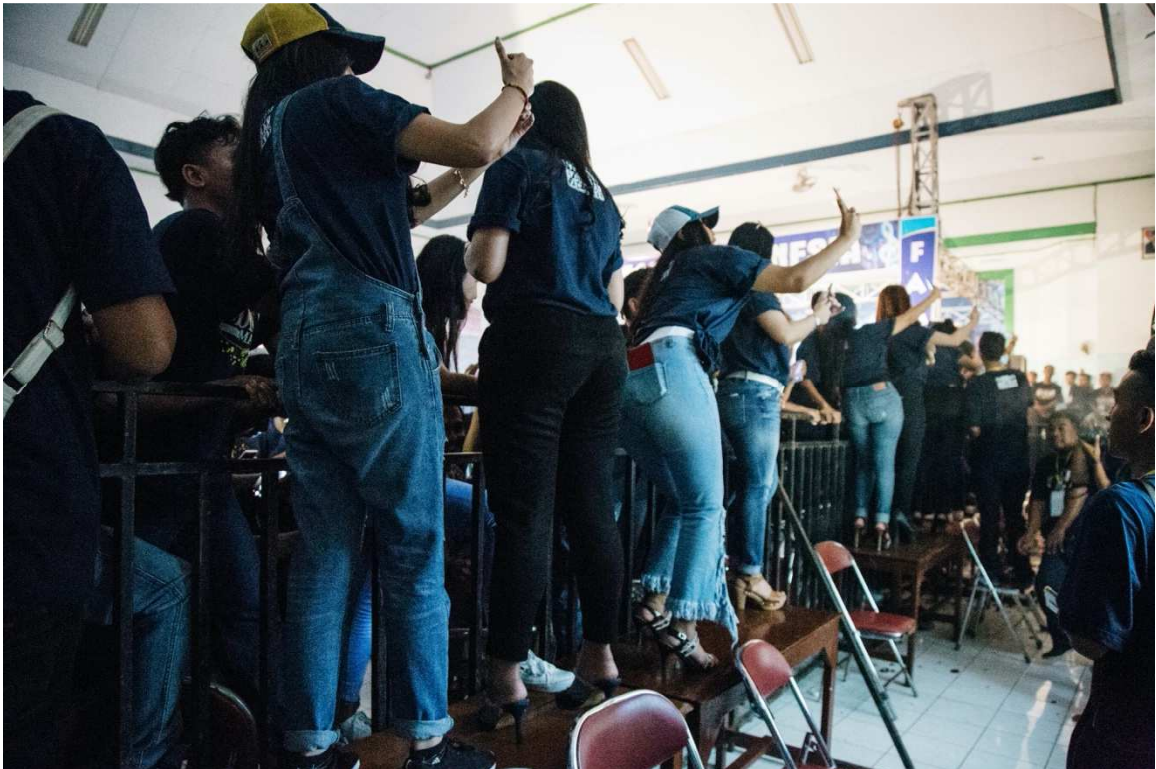
myself, I came to the field, camera in hand, with my own aesthetic preferences, practices, and goals. Images are an important part of my argument, and there are **eighty-five** figures in the dissertation. While I am a dedicated ethnographic photographer, and many photographs attempt to convey practical visual information (the shape of the drum stand, the position of the fan club), the emphasis on imagery grew naturally from a field obsessed with image. In dangdut koplo there are endless cameras pointed every which way engaged in the work of creating and broadcasting identity. Throughout fieldwork, I made and shared images, but I was far from the only one doing so. As Brent Luvaas points out, “ethnographers do not have a monopoly on seeing richly” (Luvaas 2017:191). While Luvaas writes of street photography’s potential to reveal an experience of place, I refer instead to women making, editing, and sharing their own rich images of their lives and themselves, and doing so with nuanced and complicated motivations and aesthetic understandings. By participating on social media and making images in person with singers and fans, I learned their aesthetic preferences—how they made, interpreted, edited, and shared images to construct and reveal their online persona. The images I have included do critical work by revealing shared image-making practices.

I embraced at least five different modes of making photographic images. The first was the ethnographic documentarian, trying to get down visual information that would allow me to later remember the who, what, when, and where. Curiously, these were often the moments when I was documenting alone, taking images of the moments and object and people that the others around me missed. Some of my favorite photographs came from this mode: singers getting ready, curlers in; the eight-inch platform shoes lying

onstage next to a handbag until they were needed; the car accidents along the road. Many singers disliked such images of themselves, unfiltered, uncontrolled, but others expressed that they were happy to let go of the reigns for a moment, to allow themselves to be seen through different eyes from idealized expectations.

The second mode likewise marked me as a person behind a camera, but in a practice more common to dangdut koplo. I would join the documentation teams present at every dangdut koplo concert, shooting from the side of the stage with recording teams and journalists, joining a hyper-present, masculine, local mode of photography. At other moments, especially when I'd been asked to sing or traveled with singers, I left my dutiful camera and lenses behind and joined singers and fans— modes three and four—in cellphone and selfie photography. This entailed literally turning the lens on myself—turning the lens on us, really, the singers, or moving in between moments in which I was the singer, taking a selfie with a fan, and in which I was a fan, taking a selfie with a singer. I appear in many images, mainly selfies and group photos. In koplo scenes, taking a photo or video *of* someone or something is deemphasized in favor of photographing *with*. A selfie or posed group photo communicates complicity. Taking a photo with someone shows care—you paused to take this, you stood near me, we shared something for a moment—and so both singers and fan photograph *with* as a primary method of showing their status (see Figure 16). To use Stephen Feld's words, this is "co-aesthetic witnessing" in which I did not only try to look with others, to use Deborah Wong's idea of *seeing with* (2019:45), but to look with them at *myself*. I worked to see how they saw

me, and by doing so got a glimpse at how they wanted to be seen—and was forced to face and relinquish how I wanted to be seen as well.



*Figure 16: Dangdut singers take selfies with fans over a barrier at the Monata Mania Family Gathering 2018. Photo by the author.*

The final mode is an expressive mode, through which I attempt to express something about the feel of music, movement, or dance. Most of the images included here contain some of this mode; I hope even the coldest ethnographic images express something. However, some images, like the image of the road from Nasha's car (Figure 44), were made deliberately, in this case using a slower shutter speed to achieve a blur and evoke a feeling of movement. The images I have included do critical work by revealing shared image-making practices. The images themselves, as well as the methods by which they were created, press further at the boundaries of visual ethnography and hybrid methodologies.

Hybrid methods also allowed me to participate as part of women's fandom. Because of gender stigma and historical practices that prioritize men's fandom in public space, women dangdut fans are most likely to enjoy the music through social media and television. We would watch television in our homes, texting each other through Instagram or WhatsApp. We would vote for our favorite contestants through still another smartphone application, and confer in person when we next met. While Cooley, Meizel, and Syed write, "there is no 'there'" for fieldwork, which is a metaphor, in my case it felt more as though there were endless "theres," all requiring different modes of attention and engagement, many reaching far beyond the space and time of 2017–2018 Java (Barz and Cooley 2008:90). In this manner, the fieldwork has not truly ended. Indeed, through the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, the online element of field research intensified as concerts were prohibited in Java and bands and singers turned to social media for their main income as well as fan engagement and promotion.

### **Moving Forward: Outlining the Chapters**

I approach women in dangdut koplo by first situating them and their art form with the prior texts in which they operate, the received assumptions about women who sing and dance in Java. In Chapter 1, I trace foundational stories and ancient art forms to show that although dangdut koplo is often considered to be a modern genre with modern issues, in fact it shows remarkable continuity with traditional dance. I also show that questions of women's bodies in performance, the relationship between women performers and the state, and the formalization of village practice, all important current questions in dangdut koplo, reflect similar conflicts in the past. From there, I discuss singers themselves: their

daily labor, their individual histories, and how they conceptualize their role in Javanese society and in the world (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 conceptualizes women's aspirations in dangdut koplo through the metaphor and lived experience of the road—Jalan Pantura, the North Coast Highway infamous for dangdut koplo practice. I then expand the view to include all the women involved in dangdut koplo industries, from producers and managers to fan club members (Chapters 4 and 5). Finally, I discuss national aspirations for dangdut koplo and current issues surrounding its representation in dangdut television—arguably dangdut's most powerful mass media mode—that deliberately appeals to women audience members. These aspirations are connected to larger government projects targeted at promoting dangdut abroad and even submitting it to UNESCO as world cultural heritage. I thus argue that dangdut koplo is a realm of argument about women's bodies, sexuality, and the place of religion in public life, a realm in which women argue multiple sides of each issue.

This is a story about leaving home and finding you can never belong again—a story about women who chase class mobility but are scorned because of their efforts. Said another way, these women chase middle-class aspirations, but the very path open to them—dangdut music—closes them off from the middle class. It is a story about sacrifice. It is a story about pleasure and desire. More than anything, it is a story about aspirations—to support a family, to secure a social position, to promote an image abroad. Much of the story is about women who leave the safety of their neighborhoods and homes, go on the road, and chase those aspirations.

## Chapter 1: Goddesses and Beggars, Mothers and Idols: Practice, Performance, and Women who Sing and Dance in Java

The talèdhèk who performs at a tayuban must have a patient character, because she should consider herself to belong to all the people in the wedding pavilion (tarub). She may not select [as dance partners] the men she loves, while she is touched and fumbled [by men] whom she does not [necessarily] like. Then she may not even smile; such an action would be a mistake in the behaviour of a dancer, which would lead to her not becoming famous. (Brakel-Papenhuyzen 1995:547)

The activities of female performers reinforce several “feminine” contradictions that are characteristic of Sundanese gender ideology. They at once embody both the divine goddess Dewi Sri and prostitutes. Their extraordinary beauty and dress appeal to men who are supposed to find virtue in modest women. Their frank greed for money flies in the face of ordinary standards of propriety and thrift. (Spiller 2010:89)

Often, we’ll be singing, and they’ll send someone to ask whether we’re okay with going home the next morning instead of that night. As a singer, that is a huge mental weight [...] But I had a principle at that time. When I’m on the stage, I belong to the audience. If, for example, there’s tension or touching while I’m singing, no problem. But, behind the scenes, I am myself. (Yuli, Dangdut singer and manager, personal comments 2018)

Dangdut koplo singers are a continuation of past tradition, both in the figures of women who dance in front of men and in the events at which they perform. Women singers of dangdut koplo build their lives in the face of contrasting forces: most prominently, Javanese traditions, secular modernity as promoted by the New Order, and global Islam. Each of these three forces, themselves internally varied and contested, promotes a radically different vision of femininity and sexuality, especially concerning women who sing and dance onstage. While dangdut koplo is a relatively recent popular music genre, the roles taken by singers—as idols, goddesses, ritual sacrifices, and even sex workers, grow from antiquity and are the progeny of *ronggeng*, *tledhek*, and *sindir*:

dancing and singing women whose performances both titillated and served as a crucial social ritual in Java and across the archipelago. Women's performances as part of community ritual have held the fabric of Javanese society together in mutual obligation. However, the women themselves play the role of necessary sacrifice by reenacting the legend of harvest deity Dewi Sri; the pleasure of their careers and dances—both theirs and that of audiences—requires the sacrifice of their reputations as ordinary Javanese women.

Many scholars acknowledge the crucial role women singers and dancers have played in Javanese ritual, and still others recognize dangdut practice as a continuation of that tradition. The anti-communist violence of 1965–66 stigmatized dance traditions and the women who performed them, creating a vacuum in ritual practice calling for a new genre, free from traumatic associations, that could fulfill ritual requirements. I argue that singers of dangdut koplo replace those bodies that were tainted by state propaganda. Where once *ronggeng*, *tledhek*, and *sindir* danced and sang in life-cycle rituals, dangdut singers now play the ritual role of Dewi Sri. They perform this role while balancing two other behavioral expectations: that of the modern superstar and that of pious Muslim. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the throughlines between Dewi Sri, goddess of harvest and fertility, and off-air dangdut koplo practice. While doing so, I will review the historical forces shaping gender ideals, the conventions of women who sing and dance, and conceptions of women's power in Java.

Why begin this work—largely an ethnography—with a discussion of historical forces? The chapters that follow focus closely on women as mid-level actors in dangdut



koplo industries. However, I want to avoid binaries that frame these women as either exploited victims of powerful forces beyond their control or as heroic, empowered actors. In dangdut koplo industries, as in most of the world, both are true of the same women in the same moment; at the same time, neither is ever completely true, and women experience their lives in constant negotiation. I echo Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkovich, and Carla Jones in taking a theoretical view that acknowledges both aspects of human experience by combining performance theory with practice theory into what they call performance practice. They write,

“While performativity emphasizes playing at roles, performance in fact is highly structured work. Performers require costumes, roles, and scripted lines and movements that they then memorize and enact before a critical audience. None of these is created by or dependent solely on the performer. Even improvised performances interact with audience expectations; they may challenge or startle us, but they do so by engaging us through shared understandings. All performance thus depend on preexisting conditions and meanings with which one may be able to play, but not without significant limitations” (Niessen, Leshkovich, and Jones 2003:23)

I follow their idea of analyzing individual behavior through the lens of performance practice, acknowledging both that performance of self may stem from conscious choices and that “our desire to be a certain way is not entirely self-generated, nor can we determine the outcome” (Niessen, Leshkovich, and Jones 2003:24). By following this theoretical model, I show both the significant forces that shape dangdut singers and the ways they self-consciously perform (or refuse to perform) the expectations put upon them.

This chapter sets up the historical forces that shape dangdut koplo practice and the expectations singers face. I will speak variously of conflicting ideologies, stereotypes,

and practices that all come to bear on expectations singers face from others and hold for themselves. In this chapter, I consider these ideologies, stereotypes, and practices as competing arguments, enacted in homes, on stages, and in popular culture. Through repetition, they become a performative mold, a choreography of behavior, built on the stereotypes people assume other people see in them and expect them to fulfill. These expectations are present in everyday life but are often revealed through artistic expression: folk tales, *wayang* plays, soap operas, and other ritual expressions. Women singers of dangdut koplo face competing expectations regarding proper femininity—Javanese, Dutch colonial, revolutionary, New Order, and global Islamic, to name a few—but the dominant performance model they deal with is of women who sing and dance in front of audiences of men, a complex and multi-layered model which combines goddesses and sex workers, sacrifice and greed, purity and pleasure, as indicated by the excerpts from Clara Brakel-Papenhuyzen and Henry Spiller above. As Yuli describes, however, women themselves acknowledge the expectations they face, but embrace them unevenly and contextually in a complex choreography of identity.

### **Women who Sing and Dance in Java: An Exploration of Performance Models and Opposing Forces**

#### Javanese and Sundanese Ritual and Belief

The ritual role of dangdut singers goes back centuries and is connected to fertility and harvest rituals focused on the pre-Hindu goddess Dewi Sri. In this section, I tell the story of Dewi Sri and outline the rituals practiced in Java which relate to her, as well as the music and dance component of those rituals. I argue that the women who dance and

sing at these rituals, usually surrounded by audiences of men, form the fundamental model of what would eventually become dangdut koplo practice. I argue that the conventional image of women who sing and dance before audiences of men is useful for understanding a wide variety of dance traditions in Java, but also for teasing apart the often-contested issue of power and gender in Java. Dewi Sri, a figure of power, generosity, and sacrifice, is echoed in the dancing bodies of women—figures who give pleasure and possess power, but also make sacrifices for the good of the community.

*Dewi Sri*



*Figure 17: Bronze statuette of Dewi Sri, age unknown, purchased by the author in Yogyakarta, 2018*

I would like to begin this chapter by telling a story. As Brekel-Papenhuyzen rightly points out, many ethnographic reports of women who dance in Java and Sunda start out with a myth. Both native and foreign writers begin this way, as if to legitimize the research topic and argue for its value by connecting it to religion and deity (Brakel-Papenhuyzen (1995:545). Henry Spiller likewise begins his chapter on the Sundanese

ronggeng dancer with the myth of Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi, emphasizing Dayang Sumbi's dual role as divine goddess mother and profane lover, as a means of introducing the power dynamics between men and dancers. I will also begin by telling a myth. I do so to build a foundation for the idea that dangdut continues ritual practice, a legitimization of my own. Rather than selecting a myth that explores the feelings of men in the audience, as Spiller does, I have selected a myth that centers the power of the dancer herself and her ritual role: the story of Dewi Sri (Figure 17). By comparing standardized versions of the myth to the stories dangdut singers told me and their practices surrounding the character of Dewi Sri, I show how the past models of beauty and divine femininity influence singers, but also how singers leverage alternative understandings of the stories that shape their practice.

Bunda Pelangi, the self-appointed pseudonym of East Javanese dangdut singer and band manager Yuli, told me this story as we bumped along in her car on a rocky road to Tretes in East Java from her home outside of Malang. We were a merry pack: an East Javanese television host named Lenny, Lenny's son, and Pelangi's boyfriend. I'd come to visit Pelangi's home at Lenny's invitation. Night had fallen and we'd opened a bottle of wine, two women in hijabs and me, while the men drank Bintang-brand beer. On the second floor, just outside the door to the patio, framing the television set along with a wine cabinet, sat her altar to Dewi Sri, complete with offerings [J. *sajen*]. When I asked her about the altar (see Figure 18), Yuli lit up. She told me in English,

Dewi Sri is the goddess of prosperity, which is symbolized by the Goddess of Rice, because rice is the staple food of our nation. In Javanese mythology, Bathara Guru is a god who rules the three worlds, namely Mayapada (world of the gods or heaven), Madyapada (human world or earth), Arcapada (underworld or

hell). He is the embodiment of Lord Shiva who governs revelations, gifts, and various knowledges. This mythological story, tells that the gods and goddesses live in Heaven (khayangan), including Bathara Guru (the ruler of Nature) and also Dewi Sri, and other gods and goddesses. Konom Dewi Sri is very beautiful, so Bathara Guru fell in love with her. And it can cause disaster in the universe, so the gods and goddesses try to separate Bathara Guru and Dewi Sri. Then Dewi Sri was sent down to earth. On this earth, there are many versions of stories in every region in Indonesia, many names and nicknames, but the point is she is a symbol of prosperity and beauty, which is always synonymous with green and golden.



*Figure 18: Altar celebrating Dewi Sri in the home of singer and manager Yuli. Photo by the author.*

Several days later over text message, Yuli explained why and how she kept her altar to Dewi Sri. She wrote,

I respect from my ancestors [*sic*], but that doesn't mean it's important. Javanese people still believe in myths. By caring for and taking care of the statue, we hope that the gods and goddesses will bless our lives as a family. Our generation is Muslim, but our ancestors are Hindus, we respect the beliefs of our ancestors, with the hope that our ancestors will become holy and return to Heaven. Because in Hinduism there is Karmapala, where humans cannot enter heaven if they do bad things, and they have to be reborn into the world to atone for their sins (reincarnation).

We have time to [pray] “*jum'at legi*,” we give *dupa*, *sajen* (food, fruit, coffee and tea, flowers).

We offer food, drink, incense and fragrant flowers, so that the spirits of our ancestors know that we still remember them and carry out what they did while they were alive, namely worshipping Dewi Sri and Batara Guru.

Yuli's story is straightforward: a god desires a beautiful goddess, but their relationship poses a danger, so the other gods and goddesses separate them and Dewi Sri is sent to earth, where she becomes goddess of prosperity and beauty. Yuli identifies as Muslim and sometimes wears a pious head covering—perhaps this is why she downplays the significance of her practices, calling them not important, referring to them as myths, only undertaken for the good of ancestors. However, she still gives offerings for Dewi Sri on every *Jum'at Legi* according to the Javanese calendar. This is a combination of the seven-day week (*minggu*) and the Javanese traditional market week (*pasar*). The days *Jumaat-Legi* line up every thirty-five days. She explains that this action partly reflects her own belief, but mostly shows respect for Hindu ancestors. Yuli's version of the myth is simple, positive, and reinforces both the value of Javanese tradition and her own power and agency to interact with the goddess and intercede on behalf of her ancestors. It also shows a flexible and nuanced religious belief. Yuli perhaps also wanted to give an uplifting spin to the story because of the lighthearted moment and her own desire to instill respect for Javanese tradition in me. “There's so much for you to learn, Harum,”

she told me, using the Javanese nickname she'd given me only minutes before. "Our stories are deep and powerful."

There are countless versions of this story featuring different characters with different names and varying degrees of Hindu and Islamic influence. Yuli's version is unusual for two reasons: Dewi Sri is a goddess in her own right at the beginning of the story, and her version makes no mention of sexual assault and murder, common themes in the retelling of the story. In most recorded versions, Dewi Sri suffers humiliation and violence before being buried on Earth, where her corpse becomes a source of food for humans. The goddess is often only a goddess in death; a little girl born from an egg, sometimes with names like Tisnawati or Retna Jumilah, she is raised by Batara Guru until he starts to desire her. Rens Heringa summarizes the story in the following way:

Retna Jumilah, a beautiful maiden born of an egg from the ocean, is adopted by the main Javanese god, Batara Guru, and his wife, Uma. When the child matures into a beautiful young woman her father takes a fancy to her. She refuses to marry him unless he brings her "food that one never gets tired of, clothing that never wears out, and musical instruments that give sound without being played on" [Sollewijn Gelpke 1874, 114; Rassers 1982, 16]. Despite his failure to obtain these gifts, he imposes himself upon her and she dies. He orders that she be buried in the fields, and after forty days a variety of cultivated plants are found to have sprouted from her body: rice from her womb or navel, coconut from her head, etc. Batara Guru orders that her name be Dewi Sri, Goddess of Rice. (Heringa 1997:365)<sup>4</sup>

In Java and Sunda, Dewi Sri is considered to be one of the most important deities.

In Bali her name is Cili. Her story predates both Hinduism and Islam in the Malay

Archipelago, although the versions of her story we hear today are influenced by Hindu

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<sup>4</sup> I do not attempt a large-scale comparison of all the recorded versions of Dewi Sri and Batara Guru stories in this chapter. For further information and detailed comparative accounts of rice myths, see Heringa 1997, Rassers 1982, Sollewijn Gelpke 1874, Sularto 1980, and Wessing 1990.



and Islamic cosmologies and pantheons. She holds dominion over rice and prosperity. What can we make of a goddess of prosperity who must be sacrificed by the gods to become a goddess? And why does Yuli tell the version of the story that she tells? To answer, I consider how the story of Dewi Sri is played out in dance tradition throughout Java and Sunda and how those traditions relate to dangdut koplo practice in 2017–2018, and, thus, to Yuli, a dangdut singer and band manager.

### *Life Cycle and Harvest Rituals*

Countless variations of stories and accompanying rituals sprouted with the name of Dewi Sri. However, all these rituals can broadly be categorized into two varieties: harvest rituals and life-cycle rituals. While on the surface these two ritual types seem incongruous, John Pemberton has shown the internal logic that ties the mythical figure of Sri to both harvest and marriage rituals. He writes,

For her [a *dhukun* he interviewed], the powers of procreation inherent in wedding practices are essentially the same as those that motivate rice harvest customs. “People generally call the rice harvest practice *methik* a rice-stalk wedding for Sri. You know who she is, don't you?” Without waiting for my response, the *dhukun* began her rendition of the well-known “Sri-Sadana” story. [...] “You see? It's all *mbok Sri*.” (Pemberton 1994:205–206).

*Mbok Sri* is in fact the main character of two myths: the one above, the protagonist of which is sometimes named *SriLOWATI*, and the *Sri-Sadana* tale, in which two siblings fall in love and, star-crossed, are eventually transformed into benevolent deities. Some Javanese explicitly differentiate between the characters in different tales, but many combine all these *Sri*'s into one divine feminine protector of the harvest, marriage, children, and anything associated with prosperity.

The two broad ritual categories with which Dewi Sri is associated—agricultural and life cycle—can be broken down further into a myriad of specific rituals. She is especially connected to agricultural ceremonies like *wiwitan*, which takes place at the start of the rice harvest, and *bersih desa*,<sup>5</sup> which, though tied to the lunar calendar, often takes place at the end of harvest; and *slametan*, ritual food exchanges that mark life cycle events, most often weddings and circumcisions.<sup>6</sup> The many Javanese rituals associated with death, however, show little or no connection to Dewi Sri; according to Pemberton (1994:217) rituals surrounding death are Islamic in orientation, while Dewi Sri holds sway over rituals “for proliferation.” These rituals, and the legends that sometimes accompany them, further demonstrate the connection between harvest, fertility, and sacrifice.

This association contains some internal logic, as rice—Dewi Sri’s gift—is the foundation of social life in Java. Robert Wessing argues that legends about the origins of rice are usually interpreted as legends about human origins. He tells of legends in which humans and spirits were once one species, but half ate a fantastical original rice and were transformed into human beings (Wessing 2006:19). To solidify the association, in West Java, “rice is seen as identical with women and thus with the mother” (66), and rice is associated with mother’s milk. Just as rice is born from the body of the slain Dewi Sri, milk comes from the mother’s body.

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<sup>5</sup> *Bersih Desa* is difficult to categorize under this division, since many include elements of both harvest and life cycle rituals. See discussion below.

<sup>6</sup> Rens Heringa outlines two main types of rituals in Northeast Java that focused on or referenced Dewi Sri: *wiwitan*, a ritual of gratitude to Dewi Sri at the start of the rice harvest; and *slametan*, ritual food exchanges between villagers that mark life cycle events (1997).

What are we to make of Dewi Sri's brutal treatment and of the discourses that reify its necessity? John Pemberton acknowledges that what connects many versions of these myths about life-giving rice (and, arguably, human origins) is that none of these beginnings are "unproblematic" (1994:207). "Instead, an unmanageable excess of desire [...] backfires and spills over, giving rise to a series of struggles, adversaries, and substitute identities. In the process, the world of Sri appears, agricultural reproduction takes root, and the issue of *ultimate* origin is itself scattered and displaced into obscurity" (207). While Pemberton recognizes that the god's lust is dangerous, it is still somehow necessary to create and maintain the human world. In many, perhaps most, of these stories, human origins and the origins of rice are one and the same, and without the killing of Dewi Sri, for the crime of being desired by the wrong men or gods, neither would exist as we know them. The lesson presented in this myth—that murdering a woman to prevent a man from experiencing an "excess of desire" is justified because it will benefit all humankind—plays out in a range of ritual practices in Java. Fortunately, the multiple versions and interpretations of the story, like Yuli's above, allow for reimaginings that cast women in positions of power.

Heringa collected one striking legend about agricultural rituals from Tuban, a city northwest of Surabaya. The food offering ritual at the start of the agricultural season [J. *wiwitan*] requires the offering of young sprouts. An accompanying story explains why: "Early in the morning a group of village men busy preparing a field hut for a celebration were distracted by the passing of a beautiful bride and fell upon her" (Heringa 1997:363). The bride, who is secretly Dewi Sri, submits to the attackers, saying "'*Emboh mangana*

*karo areke nek mangsa ketelu*’ (J. All right, eat me then, together with my child, when the third season [has come])” (Heringa 1997:364). The sexual connotations are even more explicit in East Javanese slang than in English. “Here, the young woman is the goddess of rice, an outsider from the cosmic realm, who voluntarily allows herself to be ‘eaten,’ thereby initiating a pact with her aggressors and transforming the violence into a relationship that offers the possibility of procreation or regeneration” (Heringa 1997:370). I doubt the young woman in question, goddess or not, understood her sacrifice the same way. The overflowing of desire described by Pemberton does not extend to the young woman’s desire; she must submit to their overwhelming desire, but she is granted none of her own, not even for her own life. Like Dewi Sri, women who sing and dance in front of men in Java must be objects of desire but must also avoid the appearance of desiring too much themselves.

On the surface, this appears to be extreme sexism. However, Javanese conceptions of power may allow readers and listeners of the myth to see Dewi Sri’s acquiescence as strength of character rather than weakness. Ward Keeler describes *wiwitan* rituals as evidence of the connection between sacrifice and asceticism in pursuit of power. In Javanese concepts of power, asceticism, which often involves fasting, sleep deprivation, and pilgrimage, leads to additional power or potency over oneself, and thus power over situations and others. By giving Dewi Sri the place of honor and the greatest shares of food, he argues, they mark her status as superior, which in turn removes their own jealous pride and allows them to achieve purity of heart (Keeler 1987:45). While this concept does not remove the sexism of the situation—for why is the woman required to

show strength of character in self-sacrifice while men give into their whims and are rewarded with purity of heart?—Dewi Sri is nonetheless presented as a character who allows herself to be sacrificed through her strength of will, not lack of will.

As outlined above, legends about Dewi Sri and rituals that reference her occur in association with both harvest events and life cycle ceremonies like weddings. In a wedding ceremony, Pemberton sees the bride and groom as symbolically tied to Sri and Sadana. On the eve of her wedding, the bride stays in the same room where the figures of Sri are kept. She attracts *widadari*, female angels, who enhance her beauty (211). Yet he writes that the parallels are incomplete, a fragmented ritual featuring “isolated traces of agricultural and social reproduction” (214). He argues that Sri has vanished through domestication. Henry Spiller (2010) counters this localization of Sri with another possibility; Sri is not only symbolically present through the bride. Her un-domesticated presence exists in the bodies of singer-dancers who perform at ritual events like weddings and circumcisions. It is these dancing traditions, the women who enact them, and how they come to represent Dewi Sri that are the focus of the next section.

#### *Tayuban, Ronggeng, and Court Dance: The Dance that Preserves the World*

Women who sing and dance have a ubiquitous, if de-centered and often overlooked, position in ritual events in Java. Ritual events in Java, as elsewhere, are multi-faceted affairs featuring many actors with stakes in the outcome. The power dynamics between players are not always clear to observers. For example, Keeler (1987) analyzes the power dynamics between an event’s host and the *dhalang*, the puppeteer of wayang puppet shows, whose ostentatious displays of potency are sometimes the

dominant feature of the evening. Power is likewise distributed among the M.C. who directs the event, the family members (often women) who oversee food and gifts, other performers, and any significant guests. Singers and dancers, some of whom are extremely famous, fit into this power matrix in tenuous and contested ways; perhaps because of the palpable eroticism that often permeates the performance, or perhaps because they are young women, their role is often dismissed in rhetorical while, in contrast, becoming the focal point of the evening. Clara Brakel-Papenhuyzen writes of *bersih desa*, “In some villages in East Java the dance of a young female solo dancer has been maintained as the most essential event of the annual village ritual, involving trance and ritual songs as well as merry making” (Brakel-Papenhuyzen 1995:566–567). Their ubiquity in a wide variety of rituals shows that, rather than mere entertainment or titillation, they serve a crucial symbolic role.

These dance traditions go by dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of names on the island of Java alone, with local variants featuring different dance steps, numbers of women, musical repertoire, clothing, and languages.<sup>7</sup> And yet, as Spiller (2010:10) points out, the context remains strikingly similar: “dance events involving amateur male dancers who interacts with professional female entertainers” at rituals in which “the basic outline of these dance events [...] relates to agricultural mythology” describes everything from *tayuban* in West Java to *ronggeng* in Central Java and all the variations thereof to

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<sup>7</sup> There is a plethora of excellent English-language scholarship about each dance form mentioned. For *tayuban*, Arps 1993, Brakel-Papenhuyzen 1995, Foley 2015, Hefner 1987, Spiller 2010, Suharto 1999, and Walton 2021 are all excellent resources. Lysloff 2001 and 2009, Matusky 2017, Tan 2005, van der Putten 2014, and Philip Yampolsky’s 1996 field recordings may all be useful. For court dance, see Becker 1993, Brakel-Papenhuyzen 1992, and Morrison 1978.

dangdut. Instead of considering the differences between these dance and music traditions, I wish to draw attention to their striking similarity and consistency, especially considering extensive efforts to stamp out, sanitize, or replace them. I view their staying power and consistency as the result efforts by women to pass on and maintain ritual practices and beliefs systems. As Rachmi Diyah Larasati writes, “the Dancing Goddess as a discourse [...] enables the study of femininity and its politics and dance as a form of cultural negation within a local and global patriarchy” (2016:“Cultural Code”).

Why are women singer and dancers so often featured in Javanese ritual, and why is the format of the ritual so consistent even as the steps change? What do dancing women have to do with the mythic foundations of many such rituals? Brakel-Papenhuyzen shows that, while the true origins are lost to history, mythic origin stories that credit the origin of singing and dancing women to the gods in Hindu or Buddhist traditions and to Allah in Islamic tradition justify the ancient practice. Brakel-Papenhuyzen gives this example from the *Tantu Panggelaran*, late sixteenth or early seventeenth-century text believed to contain the first references to this performance tradition:

According to the description in the medieval *Tantu Panggelaran*, the circumstances necessitating the divine creation of a dancing-woman were that the gods were perplexed by the fury of Lord Shiva (in his aspect of Guru, the Divine Teacher) who, after taking on a demonic appearance, threatened to destroy life on earth. The creation first of the shadow play, then of the dancer (actress) singing songs and playing, was meant as an exorcistic device to counteract Shiva's destructive force. Although there are still some isolated cases of healing in connection with professional female dancing in present-day Java, most recent studies indicate that the context of the professional dancing-woman's performance has considerably changed, from (exorcistic) ritual to (secular) entertainment. And yet a remarkable sense of continuity is displayed by the opening statement in the

above-quoted treatise on Javanese dances: “For the Javanese the tayub dance is held to ensure the continuation of the world.” (Brakel-Papenhuyzen 1995:568).

The description in the *Tantu Panggelaran* is reminiscent of discourse about Balinese court dance as well as less formally accepted dance that takes place as part of *bersih desa* rituals across Java like *reog ponorogo* in East Java. However, the erotic veneer of the dancing women, while a crucial part of the ritual, may cause the ritual significance to be overlooked by Javanese and outsiders alike. Clifford Geertz (writing in 1960) writes that wandering women singers and dancers are considered by all, including himself, to be little better than beggars, their dancing a “poor [imitation] of the *srimpi* and the *bedaja* [court dances] with elements of folk sources mixed in” (Geertz 1976:296).<sup>8</sup> Claire Holt argues that, while a particular singer at the fourteenth-century Majapahit court appears from records to represent the Indigenous female deity Ratu Angin-angin, women who sing and dance before audiences of men are usually strictly secular performers (Holt 1967:115). This presents a striking dichotomy. On the one hand, according to legend and ritual context, the dancer-singer is powerful enough to produce the continuation of all life from her performance. On the other, her role in society is so stigmatized as to make her synonymous with begging or sex work, her performance overlooked as for entertainment alone. Such a view ignores the broader context and overlooks the possibility that entertainment—humor and erotics—can serve ritual purposes as well.

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<sup>8</sup> As Cooper (2004), Hughes-Freeland (in Arps 1993), Suharto (1999) and others have pointed out, the reverse is likely true; court performers and choreographers likely drew from and formalized village dance practice. Thus the dichotomy of purity and sexualization applied to the different dance forms is patently unfair.



As we have seen above, life-cycle and harvest rituals reference the goddess Dewi Sri. But how is Dewi Sri connected to the women who sing and dance at these events? Sometimes the comparison is explicit. For example, Heringa points out that in initiation ceremonies like circumcisions, Dewi Sri appears as a sky nymph who is tricked into marriage, represented by *sindir*. “Although the villagers stress the agricultural role of the sky nymph in her personification of the rice goddess Mbok Sri, they also explicitly compare sky nymphs (*widyadari*) to the *sindir*, the hired female performers of dance and erotic songs” (Heringa 1997:370). Hefner writes of *tayuban*:

Such sexual behavior by *tledhek* has contributed to the widespread perception of them as prostitutes, and, together with the dance’s drinking and economic expense, has also caused Muslim reformists and some government officials in recent years to call for the dance’s abolition. Whatever notoriety *tayuban* has gained, however, it still enjoys considerable popularity in areas of East and (to a perhaps lesser degree) Central Java. In many communities, moreover, it is not only a popular form of entertainment, but an integral part of spirit shrine ritual associated with annual *bersih desa* festivity. Without the dance, one is told, crops might fail, people would fall ill, and the land might turn barren. This identification of *tayuban* with fertility rites has only served to reinforce reformist Muslim opposition to the dance tradition. (Hefner 1987:75)

Hefner’s description emphasizes the apparent contradiction between sexuality and ritual that makes women’s performance so easily misunderstood. To anyone familiar with dangdut koplo, parallels in Hefner’s description of *tayuban* are difficult to ignore. Current discourse about dangdut koplo is strikingly similar, and indicative of both the continuing conflict between *abangan* and *santri* ideals for Java and the insistent staying power of ritual practice.

More often, however, the association between women’s performance and Dewi Sri is based upon the ritual situation and metaphorical in nature. The woman who sings

and dances before and with men represents Dewi Sri's fertile body buried in the earth. The men shower her with money like rain covering rice fields. The result in both stories—that of Dewi Sri and the community where the agricultural rite is taking place—is a successful harvest of rice.

*Dangdut Koplo: Performing and Reflecting the Goddess*

Dwi (Sri Dwi Wahyuni), an accomplished traditional dancer from Klaten, specialized in the creation of new abstract works. We first met when she visited UC Riverside as a guest choreographer and performer, but I visited her regularly in her home in Yogya. When I asked her whether she had ever performed at an event or ritual that featured both dangdut and traditional dance, she laughed. She described for me the subject of a recent research project, yet unpublished because of COVID-19: a coming-of-age *sunatan* ritual in Indramayu. On one side of the field, the young girls were gathered to watch fit, handsome young men dance *tari topeng*. On the other side, the music clashing in cacophonous rage, a dangdut stage had been erected for the young boys, singers shaking their hips in the faces of the twelve or thirteen-year-olds.

“That is an extreme example,” she told me, “But dangdut is part of most rituals now, because, you see, dangdut is what brings all the people in, no matter who they are.” Indeed, dangdut koplo has a strong presence at ritual events throughout Central and East Java, and the line between ritual and entertainment elements is increasingly blurred. Dwi describes performing as a traditional dancer at weddings throughout Central Java:

Usually in wedding ceremonies, when the couple changes clothing at the beginning of the ritual, I perform in accordance with wedding ceremony procedure with gamelan music. [...] but after delivering the newlyweds, I follow the crowd's requests. Usually there's an *organ tunggal* or *campursari* group, and

the crowd will always request dangdut koplo songs. Fortunately, I can still dance to that, but I don't perform Javanese classical dance. Instead, I do silly movements to entertain until our audience is entranced to join in. Usually the moves are improvised in accordance with the vibes of the reception guests as the audience.

What is particularly striking about Dwi's account is how the ritual and entertainment aspects have begun to merge and how traditional dancers have dealt with those transformations. In her account, traditional dancers accompany the dangdut group and singer, continuing to perform but modulating the performance to a different music genre and to the expectations of entertainment. Dwi explained that not all dancers could make the adjustment because of the improvisation required and because it takes a different, audience-centered attitude: "Many people always complain that boring or unskilled dancers feel monotonous if they're not brave enough enough to mess with modern music."

I asked her how the traditional performers and dangdut singers related to each other, curious whether there was any resentment between groups. Dwi told me:

Yeah, because we work together, we all have to interact and be unified. Usually before the event starts, we put on makeup together, discuss how the event will go, chat together. For a ceremony like a wedding, there are lots of people involved: the parents of the bride and groom, the bride and groom themselves, the makeup artist, M.C., sound team, dancers, and the dangdut group. Everyone has to work together and coordinate for the event to run smoothly.

I observed this pattern at many weddings, where dangdut took the role as the main entertainment of the event. I also attended weddings where dangdut was the only musical accompaniment and had supplanted other performances completely. This was especially common when I traveled with highly successful singers or bands; the cost of hiring a band like Monata likely would make hiring traditional dancers or a gamelan undesirable.

Dangdut koplo has encroached on ritual events like weddings and is now often the preferred music of the event.

It is important to acknowledge that performers are flexible and rarely dogmatic when it comes to ritual and performance. Many, like Dwi, adapt to changing trends by learning new ways to engage the audience. Likewise, many singers cross over between genres as trends, lifestyle choices, or the occasion demands. Dangdut koplo singer Nasha Aquila began her career singing *campursari* and *karawitan* in Solo, but quickly switched to dangdut when she moved to Surabaya. The wife of a dhalang with whom I traveled had been a dangdut singer before marriage but focused on *karawitan* at the behest of her husband. In East Java in particular, I found little concern for the purity and separation of the music forms; most gamelan performances featured a dangdut band, and most dangdut koplo included songs taken from *langgam jawa*.

Dangdut koplo singers self-consciously utilize the image of the Javanese dancer when it suits them. Some explicitly reference traditional dance in their clothing and performance. Many use onstage choreography drawn from traditional dance forms for comic impact (portraying low-class clown characters) or to show their own versatility as performers. For example, Ratna Antika often uses choreography to entertain the crowd. At one performance in 2018, she used this tactic to joke with a group of women onstage. She combined two sets of movement vocabulary, alternating between dangdut hip swivels and masculine, clown-like movement from East Javanese traditional dance, with her legs spread wide and grounded, her arms lifted in line with her shoulders. She fumbled at a woman's purse, looking for money. She chased one woman across the stage

in pursuit of a bill, then returned to gyrate on the hips of another. The women broke down in riotous laughter; by referencing the *kasar* dance characteristics of low-class characters, Ratna Antika had diffused the tension audience members sometimes feel about engaging in with *kasar* dangdut performers. In contrast, some singers use more refined traditional dance to highlight their artistic training or cultural competence—to avoid the stereotype that success as a dangdut singer is all about appearance.

Others strive to portray themselves as protectors of Javanese traditional culture more generally. Niken Aprilia is one such singer. She frequently uses social media, especially Instagram, to demonstrate Javanese ethnic and cultural pride. In one series of photos, she shows her participation in a larungan ritual on Parangkusumo beach outside of Yogyakarta. Her hair is tied back in a *sanggul* style, her face free of makeup, her shoulders bare in a traditional batik shirt, *kain* and *selendang*. In the text of the posts, she quotes Marcus Garvey and Cesar Chavez in English: “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.” “Preservation of one’s own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures” (Figure 19). By so doing, Niken argues explicitly for the value of ethnic pride in general and Javanese culture in particular. Yet she also makes an implicit argument for her own position as a representative and bearer of that culture.



*Figure 19: Niken Aprilia at Parangkusumo. She is the woman furthest to the left. Photo used with permission from Niken Aprilia.*

This strategy is not unique to Niken Aprilia. Singer and manager Yuli does this as well, as described in Chapter 5. Fitri Carlina, a dangdut koplo singer from Banuwangi, has parleyed her ethnic pride into a position with the Wonderful Indonesia tourism and cultural promotion wing of BEKRAF, the ministry for culture and the creative economy (Figure 20). With these performances of ethnic pride, dangdut performers stake a claim as representatives of traditional culture and heritage, and, by doing so, argue for dangdut's value as a music form and their own prestige and power.



*Figure 20: Fitri Carlina poses for a Wonderful Indonesia festival promoting tourism in Banyuwangi. The caption reads: We the prince and princess of Banyuwangi wish you a happy 247th anniversary of Banyuwangi's founding. We hope Banyuwangi will be increasingly advanced, prosperous, and full of "get up and go!" Photo used with permission from Fitri Carlina.*

Dangdut koplo practice thus shares many explicit similarities with traditional dance. Dangdut koplo has begun to be a staple at ritual events, and in many areas has largely replaced other music and performance. Singers themselves deliberately reference

traditional music. But there are also similarities of practice that are less self-conscious, details of behavior that are uncanny but often overlooked.

One component of this is the timing of rituals, which remains consistent. Dangdut koplo's busy seasons coincide with auspicious seasons for rituals. The music is in high demand for carefully planned marriage and circumcision ceremonies. On the other hand, dangdut koplo's off season coincides with inauspicious times for ritual events, such as the holy month of Ramadan and *wulan Sura*. While singers can get a few jobs during such times—singing religious music or performing on television—their touring schedule grinds to a halt when ritual events are put on pause. Dangdut koplo performance thus mirrors Javanese calendar and harvest patterns.

Another component is shared behavior. Descriptions of *tayuban* in East and Central Java are often near-indistinguishable from dangdut koplo, complete with *saweran* and stigma towards the dancer. Brakel-Papenhuyzen quotes how a nobleman from Solo named R.M. Suwandi describes the behavior of *tayuban* performers:

The *talèdhèk* who performs at a *tayuban* must have a patient character, because she should consider herself to belong to all the people in the wedding pavilion (*tarub*). She may not select [as dance partners] the men she loves, while she is touched and fumbled [by men] whom she does not [necessarily] like. Then she may not even smile; such an action would be a mistake in the behaviour of a dancer, which would lead to her not becoming famous. (Brakel-Papenhuyzen 1995:547)

Dangdut koplo singers today use similar language when describing their own performance and the demands of their audiences.

Perhaps even more telling is the way singers of dangdut koplo become associated with powerful and horrific women practitioners of *kejawèn*, or Javanese spiritual



tradition. This association is perhaps best seen in the frequency with which dangdut koplo singers are cast to play women witches and ghosts in Indonesian horror films with themes drawn from *kejawèn*. Dewi Persik, a controversial singer from for example, has starred in at least twelve horror movies. Many follow a similar plot, one which Indonesian horror fans will recognize as a common trope: a young woman tricked or forced into sacrificing her virtue, sometimes by a disingenuous lover and sometimes by rape, is murdered. She returns as a ghost or a being resurrected through witchcraft and takes revenge on everyone who hurt her before finally being subdued by the powers of true love, friendship, or Islam. In these characters, the roles of dancer, phantom, and powerful woman are combined. In films like *Arwah Goyang Karawang* [E. *The Spirit of Karawang Dance*] and *Bangkit dari Lumpur* [E. *Rise Up from the Mud*], Persik's characters are themselves dancers. In others, like *Titisan Nyi Blorong* [E. *The Incarnation of Nyi Blorong*], the reincarnated powerful women, having been set free by a dukun, a spirit, or the goddess of the southern sea Nyai Roro Kidul, is now free and in touch with her sexuality and dances as a show of confidence, seduction, and even aggression. Dewi Persik is not the only dangdut koplo singer to find work acting in horror films, which in Indonesia are associated with sexuality as well as spiritual traditions. In 2018, Arie Azis and Raffi Ahmad directed a trilogy of horror movies called *Arwah Tumbal Nyai* [E. *Nyai's Spirit Sacrifice*] starring koplo stars Zaskia Gotik and Ayu Ting Ting as well as Dewi Persik. Zaskia Gotik's character is fascinated by a jaipongan dancer who suffered a tragic accident, and her desire to study the dance form consumes her. In these films,

traditional dance like jaipongan and children's folksongs conjure up phantoms, and dangdut singers are the vessel.

In this section, I have explored some ways that dangdut koplo practice reflects older dance traditions as well as some ways individual singers and dancers frame their own work within those similarities. In the next section, I will return to the history of these dance forms in Indonesia to show how dangdut koplo came to replace the ritual function of these forms.

### **Transforming Practices: Colonialism, Islam, and Modernity**

#### Dutch Colonial Impacts on Village Dance Performance

Rural Javanese dance practice did not exist in a vacuum over this period of time. It withstood (and, to a certain degree, was altered by) foreign influence. First Hindu, then Islamic, then Dutch. However, perhaps because of its low status as a rural, low-class tradition, it was able to integrate with Hinduism, withstand the influence of Islam, and be largely ignored by the Dutch, except for the occasional exoticist fascination. Little evidence survives that Dutch colonialism had an impact on the rituals and dance forms themselves. However, it did have two powerful impacts: first, colonial powers introduced ideals concerning femininity, sexuality, and family that continued to have an impact in the post-colonial nation-state of Indonesia. Second, the relationships colonial powers maintained with certain courts, notably Solo's royal court, meant that certain courtly dance traditions were reified and elevated by powers supported by colonialism, with village dance relatively assigned low status.

Both these two influences—ideals of proper femininity and support of courtly arts—were especially strong in the aftermath of the Ethical Policy. In 1901, spurred by reports of shameful poverty and injustice among the Indigenous population of the colony and a religious imperative, Queen Wilhelmina announced an Ethical Policy toward the Dutch East Indies, focused on education, irrigation, and transmigration from Java to other, less populous islands. While in theory the Ethical Policy would result in more humane governance, in practice it required greater military and bureaucratic presence in the archipelago. While transforming cultural norms was not a stated goal of the policy, the increased presence left an impact on Javanese culture and courts. Barendregt and Bogaerts explain:

“The aftermath of the ethical policy also resulted in circumstances in the colony being more favourable for the performing arts. Here, however, it was not new danceable sounds, but rather traditional and courtly traditions that were to be much cherished. Purists and conservatives, both European and Indigenous, teamed up to protect Indonesian musical traditions—much in the vein of 1930s salvage anthropology—and aimed at safeguarding and preserving what was left of ‘traditional culture’. Few saw the irony that much of these traditions had actually first been threatened upon encountering imported, mostly Western, art forms (an irony captured in Rosaldo’s descriptions of ‘imperialist nostalgia’; see Rosaldo 1989)” (Barendregt and Bogaerts 2014:13)

One might argue, though evidence is sparse, that this colonial influence supporting the courts at the cost of rural performance—especially erotic performance—might be part of the cause of stigma against similar dance performance today.

The same political and social movements that produced the Ethical Policy had in the decades before promoted the ideal of a male breadwinner and women and children’s labor rights in the Netherlands. A proper housewife, it was thought, would “lay the foundations of a stable family life, preventing disorderly behavior such as alcoholism by

their husbands” (Meerkerk 2016:150). In reality, not all Dutch women could feasibly become housewives due to economic constraints, but colonial remittances certainly helped to sustain this new ideal. Similar ideals were not directly applied to women and children in the colonies, whose labor the Dutch saw as “unproblematic and even natural in the same period” (Meerkerk 2016:140). At the same time, the position of Javanese women, generally considered by the Dutch to be industrious and important actors, was one concern of the Ethical Policy—especially combatting polygyny. So was the spread of venereal disease through sex work in the Dutch East Indies, both formal and informal. Thus, the Ethical Policy encouraged Dutch housewives to accompany their husbands to the archipelago in an attempt to stem the tide of sex work. The newly founded Association of Housewives sought to uplift women through education initiatives, efforts that would continue in one form or another until Suharto’s Family Welfare Development Movement [I. *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga*] (Sproat 2015). While the impacts of these changing ideals were mostly felt by higher class *priyayi* and Christian women, housewives as a feminine ideal for which to strive was planted.

Another impact of colonialism on women’s song and dance performance is prevailing beauty standards that value pale skin and pointy noses. Eka Kurniawan’s novel *Beauty is a Wound* [I: *Cantik itu luka*] portrays this clearly, as its heroines are in turn cursed and blessed because of colonial rape and their resulting mixed-race features. To this day, singers undergo skin whitening treatments and plastic surgery to meet a stringent beauty ideal (see Chapter 2). Regardless, though the colonial era appears to have had little impact on rural dance practices, the Ethical Policy in particular introduced

concepts of femininity and family roles that would have far-reaching effects in the lives of women performers.

#### Dancers and Powerful Women in Independence Efforts and Nationalism

Increased access to Western education under the Ethical Policy and Islamic education in burgeoning Islamic boarding schools and organizations spurred a growing nationalist movement. Women's organizations sprouted at the same time; a push for women's education and the end of polygynous marriage, with women like the notable writer Kartini as cultural touchstone, dominated conversation. Likewise, many Islamic organizations had women's branches that advocated for women's issues. At the time, Left-wing Indonesian women organized internationally in the struggle for independence, communicating with the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) (see McGregor 2012). Nationalist leaders like Sukarno supported women's involvement. Among the political leadership of Independence, many saw "Kartini not so much as Ibu [mother] but as one of their own kind, an earlier kindred soul" (Lev 1996:196-7). Although women's issues were relegated to secondary concerns, with independence being the primary goal, women themselves were seen as partners in the revolutionary effort.

After independence, Sukarno nominally still supported a progressive role for women. His 1947 book *Sarinah* described women as the second wing in the revolution. After his polygynous marriage to Hartini, however, he largely ignored most of his own writing about women. Wieringa writes of Sukarno's changing attitude, "women's anticolonial activities had only been tolerated because they could be associated with

women's motherly qualities in giving birth to the nation and with the state's preferred model of wifehood, wherein women were faithful companions to their warrior-husbands" (Wieringa 2003:74).

More socialist factions in the nation, including the PKI and the women's organization Gerwani, continued to view women as political players. Of the nationalist women's organizations, Gerwani was unusual in insisting on a political role after independence. The ideal women of nationalist families "supported their men as revolutionary fighters for a bright socialist future, while struggling along in their own women's organization, Gerwani, which also claimed a role in the national political arena" (Wieringa 2003:73). Gerwani, earlier called Gerwis, Gerakan Wanita Indonesia Sadar, advocated for monogamous marriage law and women's labor and political rights. The conflict over proper femininity and the role of women was one conflict among other ideological conflicts which Sukarno attempted to balance and synthesize.

Scholarly writing on the subject of non-court dance performance during this period is sparse. While, as Murgiyanto points out, "since independence in 1945, dance patronage has moved from the hands of royal families into those of state administrators, many of whom were freedom fighters" (Murgiyanto 1993:136), the need to establish a national arts tradition resulted once again in court performance taking center stage as elevated and refined. Geertz writes that *tayuban* performances in which women singer/dancers performed for audiences of almost exclusively men were dying out because the practice of tipping was too *kasar* for the wealthy and too expensive for the *abangan* (Geertz 1976:300). And yet, decades later, it persists in a new form. Fictional

accounts, including Ahmad Tohari's *Dancer* trilogy and Eka Kurniawan's *Beauty is a Wound*, portray women performers of *lènggèr* and *tayuban* as draws for political rallies, their bodies and voices a tool to attract mass support. This vision of rural women dancers under Sukarno dominates to this day, perhaps because of the events that followed and the prominent roles of women performers in those events.

### **The Rise of the New Order and the Destruction and Silencing of Gerwani**

“The desire to establish a sense of nationality and the image of a national past does not always lead to a truthful interpretation of traditions.” (Murgiyanto 1993:133)

Early in the morning of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1965, six generals and one lieutenant were murdered, their bodies thrown down a well. Neither the events of that night, nor the anti-communist mass murders that followed, are the subject of this chapter or this dissertation. The fallout and ensuing propaganda, however, do have a direct impact on gender norms and women's performance in Indonesia, as dancing women's bodies took a central stage in propaganda and other narratives about that night. In my analysis of the impacts of this period, I rely on two very different scholars. Rachmi Diah Larasati, a scholar based in dance studies, considers the events after 1965 through the lens of cultural memory and embodied knowledge. Javanese herself, she grew up and trained formally as a dancer in the aftermath of violence that targeted women's dancing bodies. Saskia E. Wieringa, a Dutch sociologist, is an eminent scholar on Gerwani and conducted many interviews with survivors. By focusing on accounts of the events from these two scholars, I emphasize narratives about women activists and dancers during this period.

Early armed forces newspapers began to print misinformation that later grew into the official New Order story. Telling among the accusations is that Gerwani members danced naked in front of the captured generals as a form of torture. In the awkwardly titled film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, which was required viewing for Indonesian students from 1984 through the end of the New Order, Gerwani members danced naked to the song “Genjer-genjer,” a popular song the PKI often used at rallies, and tortured generals by cutting out their eyes and genitals. Indeed, as Wieringa argues, the propaganda campaign against Gerwani, focused on sexual danger, facilitated the power transition and “laid one of the ideological foundations for the New Order’s military rule” (Wieringa 2003:83). Official autopsies meanwhile reported that the generals were killed by gunshots and blunt trauma and that no such torture had been committed. The spectre of women dancing on the graves of the generals certainly came to being because of the women who danced at PKI rallies, women whose bodies had the power to attract the masses [I. *tarik massa*].

Women’s bodies, sexuality, and performance formed a lynchpin in the anti-communist propaganda campaign because of masculine anxieties about women’s sexuality and political involvement. As Wieringa explains, this is a common theme in nation-building. “Masculine memories, hopes, and humiliations [for the nationalist project] often center around women’s sexuality. Their ‘own’ women are to be protected, while the ‘other’ women are either constructed as objects of rape or other forms of gendered punishment” (Wieringa 2003:71). While Suharto’s New Order came to power nearly two decades after Indonesian independence, Suharto wanted to break from



Sukarno's vision for Indonesia. The end of the Old Order and the start of the New was "a fratricidal struggle, a clash of masculinities," the central question being who would define national identity: the communist party with its mass organizations or the military backed by conservative religious groups (Wieringa 2003:73). One way Suharto's propaganda campaign emphasized the differences between themselves and Sukarno loyalists was by attacking women. "The subsequent propaganda campaign linked communism (and later liberal, critical thinking in general) with fear of women's potential sexual powers" (Wieringa 2003:75).

Suharto's propaganda also tied women's political participation to their deviant sexuality. Women's participation in politics was no longer as the second wing of the revolutionary body. This era of mass social violence resulted in the "eradication of politicized female identity" in Indonesia and the "demonization of women's political activism" (Pohlman 2017:197). Women who were active in political life, especially in one of the organizations seen as associated with communism, were thought to already be sexual deviants, and as a result sexual violence against them was considered justified. Sexual violence was used in attacks on suspected Gerwani members, according to Pohlman: "In the stories that women who survived this violence tell about the killings and political detention, it is clear that this propaganda had a direct impact on gendered forms of violence. In particular, their stories illustrate that sexualized forms of violence against women and girls were partly a response to perceived sexual excess on the part of the PKI, as depicted in the military's propaganda" (Pohlman 2017:200). This would have

lasting impacts on women's political power in Indonesia, as I shall explain in the section about New Order femininity.

In these accounts, I am struck by how women's song and dance performance is connected again and again to political power and activism, and political power and activism are connected to the body and sexuality. Power is, for women (or in men's narratives about women) located in the body. In the conclusion of the chapter, I will analyze these connections between power, performance, gender, and bodies.

#### *The Dancer* in Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk

The trilogy of novels *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, or *The Dancer of Paruk Village* by Ahmad Tohari demonstrates the degree to which women's bodies in performance were caught up with issues of power and popular will during the anti-communist violence. The ronggeng Srintil, is called to her role by the village spirit (or fate more generally), but her special position means she will never be able to love as she chooses or to have a child. To add to her disenfranchisement, she is condemned by modernity, Islam, and her own government. In one of the most notable passages, Srintil gets caught up in performing for communist party rallies, while the man she loves, Rasmus, embraces Islam and joins the military. Cooper explains how the ritual performance of the ronggeng was coopted for political purpose: "the ronggeng's original attraction as the focal point of a local fertility cult is now marketed as political charisma by communist sympathisers and extended to a national arena" (Cooper 2004:537). According to Cooper, the local, village community, represented by Srintil, comes into conflict with the national, military, Muslim forces represented by Rasmus. "This local-national (feminine-masculine) nexus is a key not only

to understanding the trilogy, but also to making sense of the most violent periods in Indonesian history, when passages of power spelled times fraught with terror for ordinary people” (Cooper 2004:531–532). And indeed, Srintil’s fate is a tragic one, as was the fate of the actual women dancers of the period. As Rachmi Diah Larasati writes:

The commitment of many Lekra and Gerwani members to populist, “folk”-based artistic practices, and the fact that under Sukarno they were often hired to perform at political rallies and events—including those of the PKI—were also viewed as threatening to both the emerging Suharto state and to the deep-rooted presence of Islamic patriarchal rule on the local level.

In the context of 1965, the power of women dancers and singers in particular to draw large, attentive crowds at various assemblies and gatherings seemed not to be lost on either the emerging state or the longstanding patriarchal establishment. After the rise of the New Order, the artistic practices of accused subversives [...] were banned by the state (although many were later reintroduced after having been ‘cleansed’), while performers were forced to disavow the practices under the threat of imprisonment and death (2013: 6).

New Order cleansing of dance and ritual practice, and more significantly the bodies of women who performed them, is the focus of the next section. This violent cleansing was undertaken because women’s dancing bodies possessed power—power the New Order attempted to harness for its own purposes.

#### A New Genre and New Bodies

Following the New Order’s rise to power in the aftermath of anti-communist violence, the government took pains to control how women’s song and dance performance could be used. Many women performers were imprisoned or killed. “The government also forbade ‘leftists’ to publicly perform or privately practice many forms of traditional culture, including dance and other performing arts” (Larasati 2013:5), especially those associated with Lekra (the People’s Cultural Institution) or Gerwani.

As shown above, women's bodies in performance were acknowledged to possess inherent power and danger, what Larasati calls "the state's narrative use of the female dancing body as a symbol of great power, albeit often an 'evil' power" (Larasati 2013:xv). The various government actors feared that power and hoped to harness it for their own purposes and delegitimize all other purposes. For Suharto's New Order government, that meant banning certain dance forms, arresting dancers, and then remaking the dances and dancers as tangible cultural heritage, genres simultaneously purified and traditionalized, that could represent Indonesia, unified in diversity, to the outside world. Larasati calls this a "genealogy of reappearances and erasure" (Larasati 2013:xvii) in dance traditions in Java. While Larasati argues that traditional dance genealogies were interrupted, the bodies of teachers and mothers associated with Gerwani destroyed and replaced with bodies of "clean" genealogy and formalized, standardized government choreography, I argue that dangdut koplo practice replaced what these New Order sanitized dances could not—the social, ritual context that held the threads of society together. That, more than dance steps, was ripped from East Java in the anti-Communist purges. Dangdut's off-air practice continuity in practice with these older practices: a new genre and new bodies to fill a social, ritual, even religious need, while stepping away from genres and bodies deemed unclean.

Much has been written about women's bodies as sites of cultural reproduction. Larasati pushes back against this idea in the context of Javanese dance, arguing that seeing women's bodies as translators of some ancient, peaceful, eternal dance is a type of both imperialism and orientalism, one deliberately cultivated by the New Order

government to promote friendly relations with the United States during the Cold War. The traditions the women bear are invented (Anderson 1983) and purified, with ample evidence showing how they have been reshaped, organized, and turned into a type of Taman Mini Indonesia Indah of women's dance performance within modern history. And yet another dance has arrived on the scene, a dance that resists control, that seemingly comes from everywhere and nowhere. Women's bodies in dangdut koplo are the true "[translators] of historical text" because the performance genre seems to always look forward rather than backward, propelled by popular demand rather than the creation of a national culture (Larasati 2013:2). What is being remembered in dangdut koplo, and who is doing the remembering?

Dangdut, which began to emerge a decade later, filled the ritual role left by undanceable dances, especially in rural areas. Today in East and Central Java that transition is nearly whole, with dangdut koplo replacing or augmenting other performance in all but the most traditional or court-associated ritual practice. Dangdut koplo is thus a grassroots, rather than an official, way of erasing state violence and reconstructing tradition. The communities themselves take back tradition, many without being consciously aware that is what they are doing. Dangdut koplo itself today faces threats, albeit much less violent ones, from the national government, which strives to hide unclean dangdut bodies—those that are erotic, uneducated, or crass—in favor of glamorous stars with “a different image” [I. *citra yang berbeda*]. The project of cleaning up dangdut, started in late-stage New Order, reflects the idea that women's bodies, and women's dancing bodies must be disciplined and educated in such a way that they can

accurately represent the desirable aspects of the state of Indonesia—those aspects desirable to government bureaucrats and conservative cultural elites. I explore this topic as applied to dangdut koplo further in Chapter 5 and the Conclusion.

### **Suharto's New Order Modernity**

Suharto's New Order opened Indonesia to influence from American and British popular music. Dangdut emerged in the early 1970s, as “the Indian-based orkes Melayu [...] crystallized,” consumer culture expanded, and rock and pop became influential (Weintraub 2010:82). According to Andrew Weintraub, the mid-1960s were a black hole for popular music because political violence was so widespread. In the years that followed, dangdut emerged in poor urban areas of Jakarta, Surabaya, and Semarang, musicians playing to appeal to urban industrial workers (Weintraub 2010:85). In later years, superstar Rhoma Irama would attempt to frame dangdut as musik Melayu, coming from the Deli region of North Sumatra, despite a dearth of musical similarities and lineage. As Weintraub argues, this claim connects dangdut's origins to a pre-colonial Islamic sultanate rather than to India, the west, and the bodies of dancing women. In contrast, the “queen of dangdut” Elvy Sukaesih noted, “When I first danced and sang in public in the 1960s, I swang my hips too!” (Weintraub 2008:386). From the beginning, narratives about dangdut have attempted to distance it from its social and cultural relationship to *tayuban* and similar dance performance.

During the New Order, dangdut grew to become the most popular music in Indonesia. Consumer culture and foreign influence on pop culture changed what it meant to be a performer and artist, as superstars and idols were born, created, and seen as

aspirations. Equally significant, this period was shaped by shifts in ideals for proper femininity and women's involvement in the public sphere.

#### New Order Women, New Order Families

As noted above, early New Order propaganda reshaped women's sexuality and place in politics. As Cooper describes, women were essentially divided into those who flaunt sexuality (Srintil is the main example, but all women of the village fit in some way) and *ibu rumah tangga*, proper housewives (2004:551). While Sukarno flip-flopped on questions about women's rights and roles (as his own personal life changed), Suharto was squarely paternalistic and patriarchal in his view. According to Silvia Tiwon, his 1991 autobiography contained a chapter titled "Concerning our Women," using the inclusive "our" [I. *kita*] to "[externalize] women and [make] clear that his preferred audience is male" (Tiwon 1996:59, footnote 25). Gone is the second wing of the revolution. In the chapter, he argues that women's organizations must "bring Indonesian women to their correct position and role, that is as the mother in a household [I. *ibu rumah tangga*] and simultaneously as a motor of development" (ibid).

Indonesian women's positioning as mothers or potential mothers was a crucial component of Suharto's vision of state as paternalistic family, and the bureaucratic system he put in place reflected this vision and, by doing so, bureaucratized the family unit. In a different chapter of the same volume, Suryakusuma writes, "Paternalism infuses Indonesian social organization and relationships, with President Suharto as the ultimate *bapak*, or father figure" (Suryakusuma in Sears 1996:95). Suryakusuma also argues that, according to the five creeds of the bureaucracy, or Korpri (Civil Servant Corps of RI, I.

*Korps Pegawai Republic Indonesia*), “the family household is the smallest unit of the nation” (Panca Krida as cited in Suryakusuma 1996:97). Dharma Wanita was the female auxiliary of the bureaucracy Korpri, modeled on armed forces military wives’ organizations, and it taught that women were, in no uncertain terms, “appendages of their husbands,” and that “female dependency is ideal” (1996:98). According to Sunindyo, the five the five precepts of Panca Dharma Wanita (five responsibilities of women) were as follows: “A wife is to (1) support her husband’s career and duties; (2) provide offspring; (3) care for and rear the children; (4) be a good housekeeper; and (5) be a guardian of the community” (Sunindyo 1996:124). Again, it is notable that in Indonesia—where women had for centuries been known for their industriousness as workers, housewifery was commonly limited to the *priyayi* elite, and only a few years earlier women’s political organizations had been active and influential—official ideology thus frames women’s position with women’s work outside the home almost completely omitted.

This phenomena of folding women’s roles into state bureaucracy and so codifying a single construction of womanhood is commonly called State Ibu-ism, built on the Indonesian word for mother. Suryakusuma explains,

The State Ibuism concept encompasses economic, political, and cultural elements. It derives from the most oppressive aspects of both bourgeois 'housewifization' and Priyayi (white-collar Javanese) Ibuism. As in Priyayi Ibusim, it commands women to serve their men, children, family, community, and state. As in 'housewifization,' women are assumed to provide their labor freely, without expectation of prestige or power.” (Suryakusuma 1996:101–102)

The opposite side of the coin to Suharto’s State Ibuism was suspicion towards women who worked outside of the home, and especially if they were poor and unmarried women. Such “women on the margins, or marginal women, are dangerous, are equated with chaos



and seen as a threat to the state” (Sears 1996:19), a parallel “new criminal type” to that identified by James Siegel (1998): women who are unattached, who move to work, who exist outside of tight bureaucratic definitions and boundaries. Since singers are in danger of falling into this category, I will address how they counter this image in the following section.

It is important to note that in the 1990s, working women become a symbol of modernity in New Order Indonesia—provided they were wealthy, educated, and working in metropolitan Jakarta (Sen 1998). Similarly, in popular culture, the superstar idol became a possible template for dangdut singers, glamorous and aloof in air-conditioned Jakarta recording studios instead of sweaty clubs or street corners. Television and recording industries, buying into the appeal of consumer culture, sold opulent dangdut fantasies, and singers were expected to fulfill consumer fantasies.

While New Order teachings and policy about gender roles were incorporated unevenly, even in majority Java, their influence was undeniable. New Order teachings interacted with Islam in some surprising ways; while on one hand, the New Order discouraged polygamous marriage, the New Order also attempted to confine women to a housewife role that bore more resemblance to ideals imported from the middle-class US than the real daily lives of Javanese Muslim women.

#### Singers as Wives and Mothers: Ibu Rumah Tangga

Dangdut singers, who travel alone, perform at night, and dance in public were regarded as women on the margins during the New Order. Singers unevenly accepted and rejected New Order ideals for proper femininity. Sears writes of New Order gender

norms, “In late-twentieth-century Indonesia, motherhood has become a confining location for certain groups of women” (Sears 1996:30). However, because of the different gender norms surrounding the role of a dangdut singer, the reverse was and is often true for them. As described above, dangdut singers must appear to be sexually available and willing to sacrifice their own good names in pursuit of their success. They are asked to embody erotic appeal. As a result, singers have, throughout history, been prevented from marrying altogether or asked to downplay and hide romantic relationships and motherhood. Until recently, singers were often required by managers and producers to distance themselves entirely from the perception of being either pious Muslims or mothers.

I should note here that this isn’t unique to dangdut; factories, which often prefer women as laborers, often require women to submit a letter from the head of their home village or neighborhood testifying to the woman’s single status, as husbands and children are seen as a distraction for low-wage workers (Wolf 1996:149). Much like dangdut singers who must promise not to get married before signing to a label, low-wage workers are preserved in a separate sphere as women who are not like other women. At the same time, national ideals of womanhood promoted by the state have a strong impact on how women imagine themselves, with perhaps the unintended consequence of dangdut singers becoming themselves more religiously oriented and family-focused. As shown in Chapter 2, singers today often use family and religion to show themselves as more sympathetic to other women on social media.

## Mass Media and Consumer Culture

As dangdut became more successful and visible in the late 1970s and 1980s, a culture industry began to form, based on the commercial success of the films and recordings of Rhoma Irama. Dangdut became the most popular dance music of the period and developed an image to match. Andrew Weintraub calls dangdut of this period a “spectacle of excess,” referencing Barthes, particularly because of how it juxtaposed “texts about emotional pain and contexts of bodily pleasure” (2010:114). Stars of this period, like “Queen of Dangdut” Elvy Sukaesih, referenced Bollywood stars in their costumes, dance, and behavior. While such portrayals of excess in wealth and sensuality were hardly the moral *ibu rumah tangga* promoted by the New Order, and poor dangdut singers became even more associated with vice and sex work as dangdut clubs proliferated, many singers found in the image of the star an identity they could safely portray if they were wealthy and famous enough. At the same time, off-air shows, though certainly influenced by these glamorous images, still held to the traditions established by other dance and ritual practices. As Weintraub argues, “In this climate koplo developed as a counter-genre to the style of dangdut seen on television. Back in the villages and hinterlands people still wanted their dangdut raw” (Weintraub 2013:181). Largely ignored by elites, dangdut as a practice continued.

### **The End of the New Order, the Rise of Dangdut Koplo**

The end of the New Order coincided with and was at least partly sparked by the Asian monetary crisis, during which the Indonesian rupiah dropped in value and political tensions came to a head. Suharto was forced to resign in May 1998. During the same

period, the sub-genre known as dangdut koplo began to emerge from the regional dangdut practice in East and Central Java. In 2018, Yuli, the dangdut singer who later became a manager and producer whom I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, told me about that period. She emphasized how wedding parties and technology paved the way for dangdut koplo.

Yuli: In the dangdut world, in the middle of 1995, the worth of singers began to increase. Then I would get Rp45.000. And that was still before koplo. At the same time many people started throwing wedding parties, and people in *kampung* neighborhoods would always hire *orkes*.

Andrea: Starting then?

Yuli: Yes, 1995. Rich people would always use *orkes* to show off their social capital. Now, that was 1995. After that, in 1996, karaoke started to appear. We used taped cassettes then, and that was the start of karaoke. From there, it was like a slippery slope [*I. tergeser lah*]. Dangdut groups simplified, so the singer only had to carry a cassette tape. They only need the tape, because back then there were more singers, too. They started to pop up because they could learn dangdut from their homes. This worked well for them, but not for instrumentalists, because suddenly they didn't have a market. And sometimes, when we were singing, there were problems. Tapes break easily. When we'd sing, "ahoooo..." [makes a sound like a wrecked cassette tape]. And also, because here in Indonesia, people like to drink when they party, right? This all started with cassettes. It was typical if people had a lot of money, that this is where *saweran* came from, if we got really into feeling during karaoke. They would dance with us, they gave us money, because they feel like they enjoy the experience and that they haven't had to spend too much money because they didn't have to pay any musicians! That year, we could make Rp50.000, 45.000 or 50.000. That was standard.

Although I have already established that *saweran* has a long history in traditions of women singing and dancing, Yuli's experience shows that perhaps the practice was not yet mainstream in dangdut at weddings and parties. Perhaps more significant is that dangdut performances for weddings and neighborhood life-cycle parties was a precursor to what's now known as dangdut koplo. Yuli then described how the end of the New Order coincided with the emergence of dangdut koplo.

Yuli: But at the start of 1999, the condition of music in Indonesia, and of course Indonesian singers, not to mention kampung singers like us, it had already decreased. Why? Because of the monetary crisis. *Tawuran* and other fights started to happen more often. For a while, very few people were putting on events of any kind. The year 2000 was also significant [*I. mencuat*]. That was the start of koplo, dangdut koplo. And it was also the first time we had CDs. Because of dangdut koplo and CDs, we as singers started to be in demand. And not just us, musicians too. We could earn Rp50.000 or Rp60.000, and singers were highly respected. When we sang, we'd be given facilities. They'd send a car to pick us up and take us home. For singers, that was the golden age. Yes, the 2000s was a golden age for dangdut industries. That was when Monata appeared. The wage for singers increased sharply, between Rp75.000 and Rp90.000, with *saweran* added on top. We would take home Rp300.000 a month. That was the golden age that lasted about ten years, from 2000 until 2010.

While the immediate results of the monetary crises were a decrease in performance opportunities and an increase in violence, dangdut koplo quickly picked up as New Order-era regulations on television and broadcasting were set aside. Diversification in the recording industry meant not just that more singers and bands could record CDs, as Yuli mentions, but also that VCDs were easy to make, cheap, and widely available. VCDs and CDs both further popularized dangdut koplo and revealed its presence to the middle class and industry professionals who had up to then largely ignored the practice.

The fall of the New Order and the resultant diversification of mass media, along with the influx of social media in the 2010s, had two main impacts on singer identity. On one hand, the fall of the New Order meant a loosening of controls over religious expression and teaching. Indonesia was increasingly open to and influenced by global Islam in education, consumption, and popular culture, as well as increased Islamism. On the other hand, the influx of pop culture forms like singing competitions on television, as well as increased access to social media, meant that singers' lives were more on display than ever before. Today, singer have many tools at their disposal to promote themselves

and shape their image. However, social media and the constant access audiences demand pose new risks for singers.

### Singers and Global Islam

In the mid-1990s, as opposition to the New Order was reaching its peak, scholars like Brenner (1996) observed an increase in women wearing the hijab. Brenner argues that this shift was partly a reaction to the perceived corruption of the Suharto regime itself (2018). Islam was seen as an antidote to that corruption, and the hijab as a sign of personal growth and improvement by many women. Jones adds that the emergence of the hijab in Indonesia, beginning as it did in the upper middle class, “should be understood within a context of debates about modernity and piety” rather than seen as a shift towards radicalism or Islamism (Jones 2007:212).

In the years since, Islamic head coverings for women have become even more significant. Once rare, they are now required for civil servants and mandatory in many elementary schools, even for non-Muslim girls. The debate about the role of religion in the state intensified, resulting in a series of moral panics since the fall of the New Order. Several have targeted dangdut singers. Inulmania—obsession with East Javanese singer Inul Daratista’s “drill dance”—touched off public debate over dangdut koplo, women’s bodies, and censorship.<sup>9</sup> Later scandals about homosexuality took center stage when singer Saiful Jamil was imprisoned for raping a young man.

In these contexts, singers, nearly all of whom are at least nominally Muslim, promote an Islamic image. As I will show in the next chapter, singers tread carefully

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<sup>9</sup> See Weintraub 2013 for an in-depth analysis of the panic over Inul’s body.

when it comes to religion. Many are quite pious, take trips to Mecca, and even wear the hijab when not performing onstage. Others draw a line between their work and religion, dismissing their work as mere entertainment [I. *hiburan*] and so outside of the realm of religion. When asked about how her work relates to her religion, Nasha Aquila tossed her head and told me that she certainly was not qualified to analyze, because she was not an Islamic scholar—a clever sidestepping of the question that, on the surface, shows humility. Inul Daratista often uses a similar technique on her social media posts, pointing out to those who try to shame her on religious grounds that a fundamental tenet of Islam is that only God can judge. Do they equate themselves with God?

Waves of global Islamic pop culture have also opened up new opportunities for women singers and musicians. There is significant overlap between the fandoms for Islamic pop, *qasidah*, and dangdut among East and Central Javanese listeners. Many women singers attempt to crossover to Islamic pop, at least during Ramadan when jobs are scarce. *Qasidah*, as I will show in Chapter 5, is fertile training ground for aspiring singers, and especially woman musicians, because, as a music sponsored by religious organizations, it gives girls an opportunity to study music in an all-women, community-supported environment.

The two decades since the end of the New Order have been marked by debate over the role of religion, censorship, and women's bodies in public space and pop culture. These debates are far from new and far from over. Much as Srintil represents the local, primitive, superstitious, feminine, and sinful in *The Dancer of Paruk Village*, performers of dangdut koplo work to counter such assumptions by portraying themselves as modern,

motherly, and properly Islamic. Social media and reality television are their main tools in this debate.

#### Dangdut Singers as Social Media Artis

As shown by the examples of Inul Daratista and the fictional dancer Srintil, press and publicity have always been a double-edged sword for women who sing and dance in Java. While they provide fame and wealth, press and publicity also seemingly invite sexual harassment, public shaming, and even imprisonment. Srintil was much safer before the outside world infringed on Paruk Village. Mass and social media increase both the potential gain and risks. As Cooper writes of ronggeng, modern reporting and publishing pose a much greater risk, as reporters have no face to save when they do not live nearby or interact face to face (Cooper 2004:545). This is doubly true on social media, where fans can now interact directly with singers via comments and direct messages. Like the dancers of the past, dangdut koplo singers face stigma, assumed to belong to the whole audience and assumed to be sexually available. Unlike those women, singers of dangdut koplo field those attacks and assumptions on new scales, simultaneously global and personal, as attacks enter the home, the bedroom, and a singer's cellphone. Fortunately, singers can also use social media to counter these attacks, both by publicly shaming attackers and by constructing their own image.

Singers use social media to shape every aspect of their image. Beyond posting their performances, singing displays conspicuous consumption, piety, family life, and community activism. Through social media, a singer can perform all the different expectations mentioned in this chapter, downplaying or emphasizing whatever is useful



in the moment, as they connect directly with listeners. This allows them to embrace or distance themselves from the stereotypes of women who sing and dance in Java as they see fit.

### **Conclusion: Women, Power, Performance, and Desire**

I had never seen anything like the pulse of the crowd when Ratna Antika took the stage in Jakenan, Central Java in early July 2018. They had been waiting for her, the headlining singer, and they moved toward the stage, their renewed energy palpable. A well-established East Javanese singer who'd gone to Jakarta and participated in singing competition television, Ratna Antika is a powerful force. She wore casual clothes: white jeans, a pressed, white-collared shirt, and a long blue plaid vest that trailed her movements and made them look larger than life. Her posture was grounded and authoritative, like a warrior, and she wielded the microphone as if part of her own body. Even though she had just emerged from her car and fought her way to the stage, her confidence was boundless. The whole audience knew who was in command. "Let me hear you, Jakenan!<sup>10</sup>" she commanded, her voice strong and clear as a bell (Figure 21).

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<sup>10</sup> In Indonesian, she said "Jakenan, mana suaranya?" [E. Jakenan, where is your voice?]. I've included a translation that more accurately delivers the intended meaning rather than the literal translation.



*Figure 21: Ratna Antika accepts saweran at an event in Jakenan, Central Java. Photo by the author.*

I could feel the difference between her power and mine. I was also on the stage that hot July day, terrified of the massive crowd below us and of the expectations they held of me. My voice felt small and trapped in my throat when I tried to sing. My shoulders hunched forward and my body closed off. But Ratna Antika owned the stage. She bounded from corner to corner, laughing, bantering pleasantly with the band,

dancing, and taking money from the audience all at once. She was hypnotic. There was no question who was in power here.

Fan club president Nanang, who accompanied me on this trip, turned to me with satisfaction in his eyes. “What do you think of her, *kak?*” he asked me.

“She’s incredible,” I sighed, perhaps more smitten with Ratna Antika’s presence than I should have let on in a nation which nominally rejects homosexuality.

I shouldn’t have worried. Nanang nodded earnestly in agreement, not at all surprised that Ratna Antika’s powerful presence would be capable of overwhelming a woman researcher.

In English-language press and scholarship, discussions of dangdut often turn to the question of exploitation. The tradition of *saweran*, direct tipping from audience and patrons to women, as well as dangdut’s role as the main music in nightclubs and brothels are probably partially responsible for that conflation. For these reasons, some contexts of dangdut practice can be considered related to erotic labor. However, when I asked Indonesians about exploitation in dangdut, they were more likely to assume I was talking about *women* exploiting *men*. The women, the argument tends to go, possess a great power inherent in their bodies. By simply revealing more of their bodies than is usual, or by dancing in an erotic manner, women have the power to move men to lose their senses, get carried away by their emotions, and give them money.

This argument—and the assumed way in which it was usually presented—struck me as relying upon completely different definitions of power and exploitation than mine. Some of the implied assumptions are clearly symptoms of patriarchy. The argument

ignores larger gender and social class dynamics in Java. For women of low socio-economic class without education, dangdut is one of only a few labor choices that offer opportunity to advance. The argument also buys into and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes (men cannot control themselves, women must guard themselves even when they're only doing their job) and class stereotypes (low class men are violent, drunkards, and behave like children). However, these significant objections aside, the concept of power and exploitation underlying the argument deserves evaluation. Common belief grants dangdut singers a kind of power that is natural to their bodies, that emanates from them and controls the people and environment around them. For that reason, and because so few men become singers, many Indonesians consider dangdut to be a realm of feminine power.<sup>11</sup>

To understand how singers of dangdut koplo comprehend and enact their ritual role and associations, we must first understand the implication of those associations for singer's position in society and potential power. How can we understand this conceptualization of feminine power, and how does it fit with other ideas about power and gender in Java? Since Benedict Anderson first analyzed how power was conceived in Java, scholars have debated women's position in this power matrix. Anderson argues that in Javanese aristocratic *priyayi* conceptions, power is a concrete, homogenous substance of finite quantities, and that power cannot be legitimate or illegitimate (Anderson

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<sup>11</sup> I consider dangdut to be a realm of women's power in other ways as well. Established dangdut singers form the focal point of families and communities, and their wages from performing provide for the entire clan. Established dangdut singers are almost always savvy career women, not helpless victims.

1976:7–8). But questions about how widely these concepts of power extend beyond the *priyayi* aristocratic class, and particularly how they apply to women, remain contested.

One complicating factor is that the assigned signs of power, like money, status, and control, communicate different meanings in Java. Many scholars have celebrated the relative status Indonesian women seem to hold when compared with women of Western European societies; As Hatley 1990, Brenner 1995, and Browne 2000 point out, women in Java have more control over household activities and finances than men. However, as Hatley argues, this is not necessarily indicative of greater power. “Men...are identified both with the sphere of formal gatherings, political and ritual activities, and with the highly valued cultural pursuits of ascetic exercise, spiritual learning, and refined, cultivated speech...Women, however, remain constrained to the less prestigious domains of child-raising, food preparation, and household management” (Hatley, 1990:182). In fact, women’s very control over money may demonstrate their inferior power by showing their small-mindedness and inability to achieve *ikhlas*, or sincere detachment from worldly concerns. In this way, women are expected to fill the role of household manager, requiring them to manage and control the desires of husbands as well as children, and then are stigmatized for their management abilities, which, in the conception of power outlined by Anderson, show smallness of mind and lack of self-control. Browne writes, “women’s ‘forceful’ and ‘direct’ economic activities outside the home, and in market trade particularly, reveal their ‘lack of spiritual power and effective potency’ and consequently, rather than representing a source of power, actually serve to diminish the prestige of women” (Browne 2000:15). In other words, what Western European and

Anglo-American women interpret as empowerment—control in financial realms and freedom to work—may in fact disempower Javanese women.

Women who sing and dance in front of audiences of men, and the power afforded them, call much of this power matrix into question. As women preoccupied with money, indeed performing that preoccupation onstage through *saweran*, some elements of their power are delegitimized or dismissed as immoral, even as the money they acquire allows for economic mobility. However, their position as stand-ins for the divine Dewi Sri imply a place of honor. Several scholars have tried to untangle the complex knot of gender, power, and dangdut performance. All recognize and discuss the complications and inherent seeming inconsistencies by which power and in particular the power of the dancing woman is framed. Some themes emerge: women's performance as exploitation; performance as empowerment; performance as a battle-of-the-sexes-style contest for power; and performance as liminal moment of spirit possession in which everyday power matrices are flipped or called into question. Most scholars approach the subject through at least one of these lenses, though most acknowledge they all overlap in a complex matrix of power.

#### Reading Women's Performance as Exploitation or Empowerment?

*Saweran*, a practice of audience members giving money to performers, existed long before dangdut. Geertz observed *saweran* among the "kasar" traditional arts, and it was well-established as a practice. For some observers, foreign and Indonesian alike, *saweran* conjures up images of strip clubs or overt eroticism. Singers themselves, as well as the people in the audience at these events, see *saweran* with more nuance, as a

tradition that demonstrates the power of the performer to influence the audience, the wealth and power of the person giving the *saweran*, and an opportunity to negotiate tenuous relationships of power between singers and audiences themselves.

In this complex matrix of power, some scholars conclude that women's singing and dancing in these ritual contexts is exploitative because of the stigma these women and girls often face from the broader community. Writing of *lènggèr* from Banyumas, René Lysloff says, "Until recently, *lènggèr* was considered extremely vulgar, and the girls often suspected of prostitution and general promiscuity (Lysloff 2009:285). Other scholars hold that because women singers and dancers are seen as crudely pursuing money, they lose social capital and are associated with sex work. Pioquinto argues that the performance echoes Javanese beliefs that women are by nature more crude, emotional, and sensuous than men. Thus, their performance is associated with prostitution and promiscuity (Pioquinto 1995:83). Wallach found that the open exchange of money displayed the dependence women performers had on men, as "a fallen woman who performs not because she wants to, but because she must" (Wallach 2003:11). In contrast, Spiller argues that women's performance is de-humanizing because her presence is a prop for the ritual and power plays between men. He writes,

Ronggeng represent femininity, which is portrayed as a complement to masculine energy. Ronggeng are sources or catalysts for power that can be harnessed and used by men. Regardless of the mythical ideology, the relationship between female performers and the men with whom they dance remains the same. It is not a personal relationship. Ronggeng are not individuals—spouses or mates—but objects. It is as if they, too, were agricultural resources to be shared among men. Holt paraphrases the folk tale: 'And thus it was shown that the dance girl does not belong to one but to many' (1967:113)" (Spiller 2010:85).

In this analysis, the very format of the performance is exploitative because the men in the audience do not recognize the singer as fulfilling any role they as men recognize as meaningful. While many dangdut singers describe a feeling of belonging to the audience while onstage, few see themselves this way. Cooper, analyzing the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, shows another way the practice may be exploitative: “Although elevated as a sacred being, she has almost no control over her own body or life course” (Cooper 2004:536). I found many dangdut singers would take issue with this interpretation of their work. Most feel empowered by their performance and increased economic capital. Even onstage *saweran* itself can be empowering, as Bader (2012) describes.

At times, scholars find women’s performance empowering. While Pioquinto sees dangdut as reinforcing gender stereotypes, she also sees erotic dance as a “strategy of opposition” (Pioquinto 1995:73). However, as Bader (2012) points out, this dichotomy of exploitation and empowerment surely flattens the nuance and subjectivity of women’s performance and ignores Javanese narratives about power.

#### Women’s Performance as Battle or Mixture of the Sexes

In exploring how singers and dancers fit in Javanese conceptions of power, I recognize that women who perform are seen as different from other women, and thus do not align with ideas about women who do not dance and do not offer themselves as public spectacle. Two interpretations of women who dance stand out: that they represent a dangerous combination of feminine and masculine energies, and that they represent extreme femininity. The former interpretation, rooted in animist beliefs about spirit possession and dance, considers women who sing and dance to be both dangerous and



powerful precisely because they combine those two gendered energies. The latter interpretation, based on observation of performances, holds that women who sing and dance are powerful and dangerous because they reveal their inherent feminine power when they reveal and move their bodies, which forces the dancer and the audience of men into a type of battle of the sexes. The woman's body on display creates the social context in which men can dance, but the men dance with each other while performing disinterest in the body of the woman in order to demonstrate their ability to remain out of the power of the woman.

While these interpretations seem to contradict each other, the contradiction only stands if we forget that multiple competing definitions of femininity exist(ed) in all the periods and places I have described. Just as the power dynamics of *wayang* and dangdut performances are open to multiple interpretations, allowing all the power players to be satisfied in their roles, differing definitions of femininity allow all participants to view their own power and influence in a light that satisfies them.

In some of the song and dance forms thought to reflect Dewi Sri or performed as part of harvest and life-cycle rituals, the women who sing and dance were thought to be possessed or in a trance. Srintil, the fictional ronggeng of Paruk Village, was possessed by Paruk's founding ancestor. He grants her power and possesses her while she performs. As Cooper sees it,

The kind of power inherent in Srintil as a mortal woman complements and symbolically balances the evil active power emanating from the ghost of Paruk's ancestor. By taking over her body, the spirit appears to cause directive and dramatic power to merge into one personification that is nearly irresistible, in spite of being dangerous. The underlying message seems to be a caution against

such merging in favour of a clearer separation of powers by gender (Cooper 2004:542).

In other words, the power that possesses Srintil and gives her strength and power as a ronggeng is not, in fact, a feminine one, but a dangerous combination of masculine and feminine energies. Similarly, Pioquinto argues that eroticism arises in dangdut performance because of a kind of onstage possession (Pioquinto 1995:72). For both Pioquinto and Cooper, possession onstage frees singers to perform erotically but also makes them dangerous. At first glance, the two arguments—that singers and dancers embody a dangerous extreme femininity on display, and that singers are dangerous because they are possessed by an other-gendered spirit—seem contradictory. Extreme femininity does not appear compatible with the gender ambiguity implied by possession of a masculine spirit. However, one could consider the state of a body experiencing possession. A possessed body is liminal and permeable. When the spirit of Paruk's ancestor possessed Srintil, it bound her irrevocably to all the men in the village, a vessel for their desires both spiritually and physically. Perhaps this very permeability is an aspect of the extreme femininity that the dancer and Dewi Sri represent. Here, gender is central, but not simple.

The second interpretation—that women's bodies are inherently powerful, and the singer releases that power when she exposes her body—must be viewed once again in relation to Javanese concepts of power. To be seen as desiring—for money, food, sex, etc.—shows weakness and thus a lack of power. As Ward Keeler writes, “To experience desire is to feel a lack, to sense one's own insufficiency, to become aware of an absence [...] ascetic rigors overcome and deny desire,” and rather than fulfill the desire, they

master it and thus demonstrate their own potency (Keeler 1987). When a woman dances and sings in front of men for money, many different desires are on display. On the surface, the woman actively pursues money, with frank eroticism. The men are so overcome with desire for the woman that they lose all sense and part with their money.

Seen thus, these rituals are easily interpreted as transgressive spaces, in which men are temporarily free to do as they please with the exposed, dancing woman's body and melodious voice as an excuse of sorts. But if that is the case, what of the broader ritual connotations, the significance of the harvest? Cooper offers a persuasive alternative: that spaces reserved for song and dance in ritual in fact offer men a space to perform their ability to resist desire and temptation. While this phenomenon is most obvious when men watch a woman (in this case, *waranggana*) perform, Cooper identifies it as part of broader Javanese gendered power dynamics. She writes:

Javanese women appear to be guarding the spiritual and social potency of men in these predominantly masculine spheres. Although this is less obvious in more private contexts, ordinary women (exemplified in *waranggana*'s mundane lives) use some of their considerable autonomy and efficacy in their matri-focal households to protect and elevate the status and dignity of men, not necessarily at their own expense, but in recognition of men's relative lack of innate power [...] Women help men to convert their occasionally excessive passions into more constructive forms of power. (Cooper 2000:610)

The irresistible power inherent in women's bodies is resisted by men onstage in a demonstration of self-control that increases their own power. Women singers thus perform their own power onstage, revealing their bodies and attracting audiences with their appearance, movements, and voices, in order to allow men patrons to reestablish dominance by resisting their attraction and giving women money, thereby showing

women to be less refined. It's a kind of battle of the sexes, but one in which the winner—men—is predetermined by the context.

### Implications of Power

“It is as if feminine power, unlike masculine power that directs and controls, is only viewed as good if it remains embodied rather than expressed or applied.” (Cooper 2004:540)

How is it possible that beliefs about power vary so widely? Why is the matrix of power so twisted? I argue that these multiple interpretations and arguments about power, gendered bodies, and performance are practical necessities which allow for all the participants to be satisfied with their roles. Men in the audience frame their participation in a way that absolves them according to the strictures of culture, religion, and society. Paradoxically, this involves men granting more power (rhetorically) to the women than women do to themselves. By perpetuating the idea of the inherent power of the woman's body, whether through its beauty, innocence, trance state, or the influence of the music, men free themselves from responsibility. This is a predictable move, echoed by Javanese beliefs that frame men as more spiritual and innocent than earthly, sensuous women, and by interpretations of Islam that claim men are incapable of controlling their *nafsu*, or desire.

However, dangdut singers have their own interpretations of power dynamics, as well as their own reasons for letting men's interpretations stand. Narratives about their inherent power support their careers and their presence on the stage. Singers allow these narratives to proliferate around them, and they self-consciously develop their power through beautification, ascetic practices, and dress. Women who sing and dance before

men cultivate charisma, or what Cooper has called “centripetality” (2004:541), to draw the audience to them. By doing so, they (perhaps unwittingly) fulfill a ritual role, reenacting “a Javanese mandala of power with women (however stigmatised) at the centre” (Cooper 2004:553), reflecting the power—to attract, sacrifice, and be productive, if only in death—to be possessed by Dewi Sri.

At the same time, singers recognize that these narratives put them in danger. Like the sacrificed Dewi Sri and the persecuted singers and dancers of 1965, too much beauty and power threaten the political order and must be stamped out. This is the root of other narratives about power: women frame their power as something they do not seek, something thrust upon them, and sometimes as something that does not really exist. Many singers frame their labor as a sacrifice, performing for their families or out of necessity. This rhetorical move protects them on two accounts: on one hand, it provides the perception that they do not seek power, a move which, according to Anderson, actually increases power; and on the other hand, the narratives of sacrifice reflect the performative model of the goddess even as it moves them away from it by emphasizing their familial ties and responsibilities.

This brings me back to Yuli’s story. Her version of Dewi Sri’s myth is aspirational. A beautiful goddess is sent to earth to avoid danger, and there provides for human beings. Yuli recognizes the expectations that faced her when she performed as a singer, and determined she would sacrifice her own desires for the desires of the audience onstage only. In her roles as manager and mother, Yuli works for power and connection, providing for her extended family and respecting tradition. While conceding to some

expectations, Yuli manages to rework, reframe, and reject others, performing her own version of the Dewi Sri character. This is similar to how Larasati describes her own grandmother's attempts to preserve dance traditions: "with the process of the standardization of the feminine Goddess mandated by the state," the Goddess was transformed into a "universal sexualized feminine," but her grandmother told the story differently, a story of haunting and ecological power (2016).

Singers of dangdut koplo in East and Central Java fulfill a longstanding role in Javanese society by representing Dewi Sri in harvest and life cycle rituals, requiring them to embody both pleasure and sacrifice. Likewise, singers take pleasure in their work and recognize what they sacrifice in the process. By taking this role, dangdut singers reconstitute Javanese understandings of power in a way that makes an argument for their own authority and agency.

## Chapter 2 Desiring Singers: Labors of Pleasure and Sacrifice

In late 2018, Via Vallen, a dangdut koplo singer who had risen to become the top solo artist in Indonesia, publicly shamed a foreign soccer player for sexually harassing her on the social media platform Instagram. She posted screenshots of his direct message requesting a private concert in her bedroom with sexy clothes. While several commenters rallied support around her, many accused her of being *lebay*, or overly dramatic in her reaction. Others wrote that, as a dangdut singer, she should expect sexual harassment as part of the job. One comment stated, “Before she became popular, she was an itinerant singer, and just imagine what itinerant singers are like?” And another: “You’re a singer...naturally there are many who harass or seduce you. If you don’t want to be harassed, what are you doing becoming a singer? That’s the risk.”

Women singers of dangdut koplo build their lives in the face of contrasting forces: most prominently, Javanese tradition, secular modernity as promoted by the New Order, global Islam, and mass media celebrity. Each of these forces promotes a radically different vision of femininity and sexuality, especially concerning women who sing and dance onstage. As discussed in the previous chapter, women who sing and dance onstage for audiences of men are seen as powerful, necessary, and dangerous. While much of society views their career as akin to sex work, being a dangdut singer also provides opportunity for economic mobility and pleasurable labor. In the face of stigma, singers balance the practice and perception of both pleasure and sacrifice in their onstage, social media, and community performances. Singers themselves have internalized the ideals of Javanese tradition, global Islam, and secular modernity unevenly, and each emphasizes

different aspects of her identity in performance, but all singers of dangdut koplo face the expectations placed upon women and performers by these forces.

Singers thus find themselves in a double bind in which the most profitable line of work available to them is also the most stigmatized, despite the crucial functions it serves in everyday life and its banality among the rural and poor. Drawing from the myth of Dewi Sri as well as the lived experiences of dangdut koplo singers, I interpret dangdut koplo singers' lives through the lenses of desire, pleasure, and sacrifice. The desire I speak of is twofold: singers are objects of desire, glamorous and beautiful idols, but they are also driven by their own desires for economic mobility, fame, and creative expression. However, because of the stigma they face, singers are caught in a double bind of pleasure and sacrifice: of using beauty and talent to fulfill a ritual requirement that brings pleasure to themselves and others, but also be stigmatized for it. Singers handle all this changing context by mediating these conflicting forces and requirements with a calculated dance of identity. Through this dance, they alternately frame their identities as modern, secular performers (called *artis* or *biduanita*), pious Muslims, homemakers [I. *ibu rumah tangga*], and protectors of Javanese ethnic pride. As in the last chapter, I follow Niessen, Leshkovich, and Jones (2003) in combining performance and practice theory to explore both the preexisting expectations dangdut koplo singers face and the conscious choices they make to fulfill their own desires in their given circumstances.

While the previous chapter outlines the historical and social forces that shape dangdut koplo practice, this chapter is about how women deal with those forces and expectations. The previous chapter discussed the multitude of contexts and conversations



the archetype of the singer-dancer engages in, while this chapter explores the experiences of singers of dangdut koplo today—how they deal with the pressures to simultaneously fill the roles of pop music idol, pious wife and mother, and goddess of harvest and fertility, and why they choose to embark on such careers despite the stigma they face. By their very existence and performance, dangdut singers trouble ideals for women’s bodies, proper femininity, and women’s labor common in Java and the Indonesian archipelago—both the ancient (Hindu-Buddhist and animist) and more recent implants (Islamic, Dutch colonial, and post-colonial nationalist).

Through their performance, women performers of dangdut koplo make an argument. They argue through performance for their right to seek money, status, and pleasure any way they choose. But they also make an argument for the possibility of an Indonesia in which women “are the center of the mandala” of power, to quote Cooper, in which the *rakyat* (common people) are free to pursue pleasure, in which Javanese and Madurese ethnic pride safely join forces, in which Islam is only one identity marker among many. Singers make these arguments unevenly and imperfectly. The vision presented in dangdut is not, as Jeremy Wallach argues, a utopian alternative to government and Islamic visions of brotherhood, with only women left out of the vision (Wallach 2014); even among men in dangdut audiences, dangdut performance comes replete with its own hierarchies, prejudices, and assumptions. The arguments singers make are powerful enough to stand through centuries against the powers that be, whether those powers were Dutch colonial, New Order bureaucrats, Islamic teachers and leaders,

or the educated, secular elite. And as difficult as their lives may be in their positions, women singers and dancers are perpetrators of this argument rather than victims of it.

In this chapter, I weave together interview excerpts and ethnography with several women dangdut performers. I show the variety of ways in which women dealing with similar social pressures and desires view themselves and their role in society. I begin by outlining how women come to pursue careers as dangdut singers, what their daily lives look like, and their personal and professional goals. Then I explore two main themes that arise from their words and experiences as they pursue their desires: sacrifice and pleasure.

### **A Girl from the Kampung**

While there are many differences between women who embark on careers as dangdut performers, they share some common themes. In this section, I show draw on case studies of several regional singers to show how women embark on careers as singers, how they maintain those careers, the activities of their daily lives, and how their careers impact their family relationships.

Most singers begin at a very young age. Most are encouraged by their families, and many become the main breadwinner for the family at a young age. Most are lower middle class, but not impoverished, as their family must be able to provide the time, capital, and connections necessary to begin a career, buy appropriate clothes, etc. Singer Rere Amora, from Surabaya, explains:

Rere Amora: I still have two younger siblings I need to provide for. You see, my father's wages are just enough to pay for food, even though he is in the army and we're a military family. His wages just aren't enough. So, I had to work. My older sister got married, my younger brother went into the army too.

Andrea: And after they're already secure, only then could you stop?

Rere Amora: Then I could, but it's like this. I have an older sister. She got married. The marriage was before her high school graduation. She was...her dating was out of control, and the fear was that she'd get pregnant, so she was married. Her husband doesn't work, so every month I send them money. It's all my responsibility [I. *ditanggung aku*].

Rere paints a picture of poverty and struggle. This type of response was common for dangdut singers, who often outlined a family narrative of last resort. Manager Yuli, who began her career as a singer, tells a similar story of her family living in the mountainous city of Trawas between Surabaya and Malang.

Yuli: I sang dangdut starting at age twelve. My father was a musician and an elementary school teacher. Because he was an elementary school teacher, his wages were only Rp30.000 a month. This was 1992. I have three sisters. My father was a government employee, so he couldn't have any other jobs besides elementary school teacher.

Like Rere, Yuli's family had fixed government incomes. Dangdut's informal economy was a way to earn extra money outside government restrictions against civil servants holding multiple jobs.

Singer Nasha Aquila has a parallel background, though she started singing dangdut later in life. She was born in Solo. Her father was a musician, and she grew up performing campursari, a kind of light classical Javanese music that blends gamelan ensembles and scales with simpler forms and romantic lyrics. She remembered those days fondly and once showed me a bright pink kebaya blouse and batik-printed cloth she had worn in those days.

Nasha: At the time I wasn't singing dangdut, Andrea. Campursari. Sinden. Wayang kulit. But after I graduated high school, I came to stay here in East Java, and I sang dangdut.

Andrea: How old were you when you came to stay here?

Nasha: I was nineteen, maybe eighteen.

Andrea: Eighteen. And why did you move?

Nasha: I came with my older sister. Surabaya was where the action was, and she wanted to work at a big business, and she did. But because she was at a big business, a place like that pays wages once a month. It was too long to wait, and not enough. So I started to sing. At first, I only got paid Rp25.000. Now it's so much higher. From not having anything, no home, no motorcycle, no car. Now...with my husband, we came from the bottom.

One narrative dominates the stories dangdut singers tell about their origins: they began to sing because they had to contribute to family income. However, despite their grim portrayals, none of these stories are of abject poverty. Promoting the dangdut career of a child requires investments of time and capital. These families see the pleasure and interest their child finds in singing and see an opportunity. Aspiration as well as need shaped these women's career trajectories. I must acknowledge that each of the singers above achieved regional success. It is possible that their parent's positions, as a schoolteacher, military officer, and traditional musician, allowed them to guide their child to success. Other dangdut singers, those who never rise beyond the level of club singer, may come from a different background.

I am struck by this narrative of need and sacrifice again and again. From a middle-class background myself, I understand all too well the gnawing fear of falling behind, the drive that says my efforts are never enough. I imagine part of what singers describe in these narratives is that kind of fear, the fear of falling into abject poverty and the push to do more and do better. It's seen what singer Fitri Carlina describes as the main struggle of her career: to always be creating new works [*I. terus berkarya*], because to stop means falling into irrelevance.

On the other hand, dangdut singers tell this story of sacrifice partly to obscure their own desires and pleasure. In these narratives, singing is almost never their idea. They do it to support their families, sacrificing their own desires. And yet, only moments after sighing and telling me that all the responsibility fell to her, Rere looked at me with a glint in her eye. “The work of a singer is also pleasurable, though. I get paid for a hobby.” It is this intersection, the pull between the pleasure a singer feels and projects onstage and the sacrifice she enacts for her family and emphasizes in narratives about herself that I emphasize throughout this chapter. It mirrors the narratives about beauty and sacrifice in the stories told about Dewi Sri in Chapter 1.

#### Starting and Maintaining a Career

As Rere, Yuli, and Nasha explain above, careers for singers start very young. They usually begin locally, as the young girls win a few neighborhood or school singing contests and start to earn some money performing for local events. Yuli describes her early career trajectory with thoughtful context.

Yuli: I started performing at many, many events, performing dangdut. At this time, it wasn't koplo yet, it was regular dangdut. Every Saturday night my father and I would go to a hotel in Tretes to entertain guests. From that we got to know dangdut. Because the guests thought I had a good voice, I was invited to join with several dangdut groups. Back then, in 1992, I was paid Rp5.000 for each show. At that time, I was in my first year of middle school (class 1 SMP). In between semesters, I had the opportunity to meet the Governor of East Java, Bapak Basofi Sudirman. He also loved dangdut songs. This is when I started to thrive, because he loved dangdut and he was also a leader in Golkar, a political party in Indonesia.<sup>12</sup> From there, I performed at more and more shows. Soon I was

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<sup>12</sup> Yuli here refers to Golkar, a *singkatan* of Party of Functional Groups [I. *Partai Golongan Karya*], as one of several political parties in Indonesia. While that is true today, at the time Golkar was not formally a political party. Rather, it was the ruling organization of the Suharto government. It ruled Indonesia from 1971 until 1999. Today Golkar still exists as one of many political parties.

traveling to big cities throughout Indonesia to perform. I was getting paid Rp25.000, which at that time was as much as what my father made in a month. From that, I was able to provide for my younger siblings. My parents, who had lived in the housing provided by the school, could move at last into the home I rented with my earnings. I financed my younger siblings, and I helped my parents.

Yuli's experience shows the importance of making contacts and finding patrons. Nasha describes how she had to change her image and singing technique to get work.

Andrea: Do you still like to sing campursari?

Nasha: Well, now I sing dangdut.

Paijo: We follow what's popular.

Nasha: And follow the jobs. Jobs in Java, Solo, Surakarta, what they most like is Campursari. Here in East Java, it's all dangdut. That's what's most familiar here in East Java. In Solo and Jogja, it's campursari.

Andrea: But the singing technique must be different, right? How did you learn?

Paijo: In my view, campursari is above dangdut. If someone can sing campursari, they can usually sing dangdut too. But if they sing dangdut, that doesn't necessarily mean they can sing campursari.

Nasha: To sing campursari, you have to be able to use falsetto, head voice [I. suara udara]. A voice that's high, high up in your head.

Andrea: What about the cengkok in dangdut?

Paijo: Yeah, cengkok. And in campursari you use falsetto. It's different.

Andrea: How did you learn?

Paijo: Yeah, just practicing!

Nasha: Listening!

Paijo: Getting feedback and criticism.

Careers are full of pitfalls for singers. Transitioning from one phase to the next—for example, a touring child singer to an adult artis, or a club singer to a touring one—requires careful planning, opportunity, and luck. Lenny, a singer who performs many genres and eventually transitioned to a career as a television MC, discusses the role luck plays for singers.

Lenny: Most singers have their own skill. One artis might be clever with banter. Another might have such a voice that just by singing she opens people's minds to her. It just depends. It depends for everyone based on *hoki*. Do you know what *hoki* is? It's from Chinese, and it means luck. Luck and brilliance [I. *keberuntungan dan keterangan*]. So, while one singer might not be the best talker,

if she's lucky, audiences will still be happy with her. Maybe that's just because God created it that way, believe in God or not, maybe it's because God made her that way. While one singer who doesn't have any skill with an audience, or another who is great at singing but still only makes it this far. It turns out, luck is the most important thing.

Many East Javanese singers used the word *hoki* to refer to certain moments in their careers, whether for good or bad. Their actions, however, clearly demonstrated their belief that effort, especially in controlling their appearance and communicating with contacts, was equally important.

As a singer who never fully got her career off the ground, Lenny is a noteworthy example. In the following excerpt, she discusses some high points and challenges in her career where luck played a significant role.

Lenny: When I was little, I was always singing and talking about how much I wanted to be a singer. No one in my family liked to sing except me, though many of my ancestors were good at reciting the Qur'an. I won a prize once and ran straight to singing. [...] I started singing with a band in my third year of middle school, a band that was part of Karang Taruna, an organization for young people in kampung neighborhoods. The Karang Taruna had a band, had all the instruments for a band. Eventually we commercialized. If there was an event in our *kelurahan*, we were always asked to perform. At first, we earned Rp35.000 through Karang Taruna.

Andrea: And this was a band, like with a guitar—?

Lenny: Yes, like a complete rock band. My next big opportunity was going to Australia, to Darwin. It was with Wonderful Indonesia. The people in Darwin put together a Wonderful Indonesia event, and the contents of the event was all Indonesia people. It was an event with the Indonesian consulate. We performed dangdut songs, keroncong, songs by Broery, an old pop star. That was in the year 2002. After traveling to Darwin, I became a guest star on SCTV, an quiz show called *Kocok-Kocok* (Shake it Up!). Around the same time, I competed in a karaoke contest. Then it was *hoki* too, it was also luck, because when I competed by opponent honestly wasn't very good. I won, not because of me, but because they weren't good. I won first place and was even offered a recording deal. He offered first to the producer, hey, want to offer a record deal to the first-place winner? And I was given the chance because I won first place. However, I was just a person from the village. I came from Surabaya to Jakarta and was offered an album. Yes, of course I wanted it, no problem! But I had to pay for it myself, he

said. Okay, I said, let's work together. I'll make it, I'll stay in Jakarta for as long as the recording process takes, one month. So, for all that time I stuck with the producer and was a guest star on SCTV.

The luck of recording an album would be short-lived for Lenny, as I will discuss later.

Dangdut singers look with anticipation for the next big opportunity, which often does not happen [I. *tidak jadi*]. Lenny's strategy for success took a formal route. Rather than touring to build a fanbase, she focused on opportunities in the formal sector, through the government's Ministry for Tourism and the Creative Economy (BEKRAF) and television shows. This is perhaps because she grew up singing pop and rock as well as dangdut. This strategy eventually led to a high-profile career in television, but not success as a singer outright.

For most singers, the path is both more straightforward and more precarious. Many start as young girls, competing in neighborhood and school competitions. Some become so famous at that period that, with the support of their parents and community, they can embark directly on a touring career and make a fortune by the age of fifteen. Singers like Tasya Rosmala and Jihan Audy take this route.

Others, like Nasha Aquila, start older and so begin by singing in nightclubs and at kampung parties. Most singers try to disassociate themselves from work in nightclubs in their rhetoric. They hardly bring it up in their life stories, if at all. However, most continue to have guest performances at clubs well into their touring career. They balance dependence on erotic work with the need to be perceived as distant from it, and their social media feeds reflect the challenge here. Singers swiftly untag, conceal, or remove pictures that fans and patrons post of them in clubs.



## Daily Life

Nasha Aquila and Paijo lived in a simple three-bedroom home in Sidoarjo with Nasha's parents and their two children, one a young teen, the other an infant, when I first visited their home in August 2018. They had a spacious garage for their Honda SUV, the vehicle that took them everywhere, but they did not yet have furniture for their living room. Nasha and I had left the studio for *Stasiun Dangdut* together after her on-air performance to go to a rehearsal. Following the rehearsal, she invited me to help her prepare for Eid Al Adha. She counted the money she'd been paid at rehearsal and clutched it in an envelope in her hand. Night had already fallen as we approached a temporary corral with a dozen goats inside (see Figure 22). She selected one and negotiated with their owner. I sensed her growing disappointment, though she kept up a happy face, as she realized that she was buying late and prices were high. Oh well. She paid and the man loaded the goat into his truck and followed us to Nasha's neighborhood mosque.



*Figure 22: Shopping for a goat with Nasha Aquila in Sidoarjo, August 2018. Photo by the author.*

After dropping off the goat, Nasha brought me to her home. Paijo sat on the living room carpet playing with their infant son. Their older daughter, her curly hair cropped short, wanted to take selfies and show me her mother’s prizes and awards.

“Practice your English,” Nasha insisted. Her daughter shyly shook her head.

Their home was simple, but brand new. A small guest room and living room, the bedroom Paijo and Nasha shared at the front of the house, two other bedrooms for Nasha’s two children and her parents, one home to a wardrobe that stored her show clothes, a kitchen in the back, and a staircase to an unused attic space. The walls were decorated with framed prizes and selfies: Nasha’s award for most valuable singer from Wali Band, Paijo’s selfies with famous band members. A fan had painted Nasha’s face onto a kendang drum for Paijo, and he displayed it proudly in the corner (Figure 23). The

whole home and family gave off the impression of pride and support for Nasha. There was also the feeling of recent success after a period of bad luck, many new items in the home with significant purchases not yet made.



*Figure 23: Paijo's kendang drum painted with the likeness of Nasha Aquila. Photo by the author.*

Nasha gave me a jacket to wear. She led me and her daughter outside, where the activities of Eid Al Adha had already started. Women and children were gathering at the mosque and lighting torches (Figure 24), while men circled in trucks, shouting and reciting holy words. Among all the women there, only Nasha and I left our heads uncovered. It surprised me that she did so, having often seen her put on a hijab for fashion shows and religiously tinted performances. Perhaps she left it off so I would not feel uncomfortable; Nasha was sometimes like that. She introduced me to her sisters who lived nearby, and we were off, circumventing the neighborhood gingerly in the dark.



*Figure 24: Circling the neighborhood for Eid Al Adha with Nasha's sister, mother, and neighbors. Photo by the author.*

Dangdut singers work on limited contracts, and so each day might look different. On this day, Nasha performed live on television at noon before stripping off the costumes and makeup for a band rehearsal. Having fulfilled these responsibilities, she returned home to care for her family and community. Always aware of community expectations, Nasha was proud of her ability to contribute, but I got the impression she could not always give as much as she wanted to. Because of her busy schedule, she relied heavily on help from her parents and husband when it came to childcare and household responsibilities. And yet this did not seem to be an issue. She provided a home for her parents, who happily helped out and supported her in return.

Many of the singers I met similarly provided and relied on family help. Most of their time was taken up with performing, preparing for events, and connecting with fans

and potential opportunities on social media. Shopping for clothing, trying new beauty products, and editing photographs and video also took up a large part of their days. Many singers who reached regional success had diversified their economic interests, investing in massage parlors, restaurants, tobacco farms, and various other interests that took up much of their time. They relied on help and support from family and friends, and in return provided them with economic security.

In their busy seasons, singers' days are spent on the road in a dizzying rush of touring. They might have five shows in a twenty-four-hour period, all in different cities. These periods test singers' stamina and willpower, as they sleep and put on makeup on the road, shower in gas stations, and rarely see their families. This experience is so emblematic of dangdut singers' lives that I will discuss it in depth in the next chapter.

#### Marriage, Family, Children

Rere Amora and I sat on a mattress on the floor of a cheap hotel in Pati, Central Java, in early July, 2018. I had just sung my first concert with the band OM Monata, and they put me up in a room with Rere. Rere had a special deal with Monata. She had a continuous contract with them, and she traveled with them to every concert. She studied me shyly as we got ready to sleep.

Rere Amora: What's your religion, Andrea?

Andrea: Christian.<sup>13</sup>

Rere Amora: My fiancé is also Christian, but he already switched to Islam. The issue was that I didn't want to be with a Christian.

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<sup>13</sup> Until recently, Indonesia mandated that all citizens and visa holders declare a religion on their identity cards. The religion could be one of six: Islam, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism. Not a practicing Christian myself, I selected Christian for my visa because I understood most people would assume I was a Christian.

Andrea: That's really difficult here.

Rere Amora: What's really difficult is telling my parents I want to be with a Christian. He and I were already so happy together, so we didn't want to be separated. And for me to become a Christian, that would be impossible. So he was forced, commanded [I. *terpaksa, disuruh*] to become a Muslim. [Quietly] But it's not a big deal. [Showing me his photo on her phone]. He's from Semarang. There are a lot of Christians in Semarang.

Andrea: That's him?

Rere Amora: Yeah.

Andrea: Wow, he's tall, right?

Rere Amora: He's about this tall, not that much taller than you, really. I don't know, I know he's ugly [laughs]. But he's patient.

Andrea: Patient?

Rere Amora: He's not a jealous man. Jealousy is far too common when you're dating a singer [I. *biduan*]. There will always be jealousy. As close as we get to men...but he's not like that. I mean, he understands. Because of that, my parents accept him. I had a boyfriend in the past, he was a police officer. He didn't understand my work. He commanded me to stop, even though I still have two younger siblings to provide for.

Andrea: After you're married, you plan on continuing work as a singer?

Rere Amora: Yes. My fiancé doesn't forbid it, Andrea. He's not angry about my work, so I can still do it. Working as a singer is pleasurable, because I get paid for my hobby [laughs].

Norms around marriage and children are rapidly changing for dangdut singers. At the beginning of my fieldwork, it was the norm for singers to pretend they were single and childless regardless of their home situation. Sometimes this was mandated by record labels; Nasha Aquila refused to sign with the Jakarta label Nagaswara because they required singers to be, or at least pretend to be single. For other singers, it was a strategy to preserve their mystique and attraction for young men in the audience. Who would want to have fantasies about a married woman, the shared common sense asked?

Social media, and Instagram in particular, changed this norm. Suddenly audiences demanded a look at singers' "real" lives. The voices of women audience members, who, it had been assumed, wanted only sad stories and glamorous dresses, now wanted to



know about personal lives and habits. Many singers revealed that, not only were they married, they had several children as well. Rather than decrease their appeal, intimate glimpses of their home life and family humanized singers and helped audiences feel close to them. It was also a way for singers to control their reputations [I. *nama*]. With only a few photographs, they could show that they too were good mothers, pious Muslims, TikTok dance champions, or anything else that helped them connect with a target demographic. Social media connection is not without risk for them, of course, but it did allow them to speak openly about marriage and family if they so wished.

One of the happiest marriages I witnessed was between singer Nasha Aquila and kendang-player Paijo (Figure 25). Theirs was a true romance marriage, and they saw each other as romantic partners as well as partners in establishing family and career.<sup>14</sup> They tirelessly supported each other, communicated constantly, and shared strategies. As I wrote in fieldnotes, Nasha once told me in an intimate moment:

She says they met while playing/performing (di orkes!). She didn't like him—too dark and acne. But you don't get a choice with *jodoh* [E. soulmate, from Javanese]. From nothing, they used to rent a *sepeda motor*, and now they have a car! And he's never looked at another woman over eleven years, because he's proud she's his wife. He called her *orang terbaik*, the best person. She gives and gives.

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<sup>14</sup> As Richard Fox (2020) has argued, Indonesian attitudes toward the place of romance and intimacy in marriage are undergoing a transformation. This transformation is not only visible in demographic studies about age of marriage, courtship patterns, and gendered division of labor, but also in popular culture, where creators (directors, writers, actors, and yes, dangdut singers and musicians) present differing arguments about the nature of romantic intimacy. He analyzes the portrayal of romance in the 2017 hit song “Jaran Goyang,” or “The Rocking Horse,” to show a view of romance as a field of conflict and manipulation. While not all dangdut koplo songs portray romance this way, many singers chose to marry out of economic necessity or opportunity instead of either Islamic piety or upper middle class romantic love.



*Figure 25: Paijo playing kendang at a Palapa concert in Lumajang, East Java, 2018. Photo by the author.*

We later discussed the importance of communication in their relationship. While it's not uncommon for musicians and singers to develop romantic relationships with each other, a traditional view of Javanese gender politics like that described by Rere above might assume that the husband would be jealous and controlling towards the singer. Nasha and Paijo describe how, for them, the potential for jealousy worked in two directions:



Nasha: Andrea, aren't you worried about leaving your husband in America?

Andrea: No, because—

Paijo: [laughs]

Andrea: We try to be honest. If there's an issue, we say, just tell me about it.

Paijo: Yes, communicate.

Andrea: If something happens, just be honest.

Nasha: My husband and I also trust each other.

Andrea: That's what's important, communication and trust.

Nasha: Kendang players, many get involved with lots of women.

Andrea: Singers?

Paijo: Ghosts! [laughs]

Nasha: But I just laugh.

Paijo: Really, it's the opposite [laughs]

Nasha: True, it's reversed. I'm a singer, and many men try to flirt with me. So we have to trust each other.

Paijo: Oh yeah.

Not all marriages are as happy or unified as this. Marriage can be fraught for singers, who know that many men carry assumptions about their sexual availability, and that not every man will pursue a dangdut singer for marriage, and even fewer will allow her to continue singing after marriage, as Rere describes in the opening. Singers are aware that their careers are limited. Unless they become superstars, they know their work as a singer will likely peter out in their late thirties or early forties. Marrying well is one possibility for maintaining their comfort for the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, the story is unhappy for many. Working in the world of *hiburan malam* [E. nighttime entertainment], many singers became involved with already married men at a young age. They become mistresses or second wives, whether formally or informally. Lenny once explained this to me in a hushed tone.

Lenny: Most dangdut singers become second wives.

Andrea: Most?

Lenny: Most. It's extremely common. The singers are young, they meet in a club, the man has a lot of money. So they become a second wife. Sometimes the man even supports their career.

This manner of proceeding sometimes seems attractive to the poorest of dangdut singers. Being a singer requires a large amount of capital for performance clothes, makeup, and plastic surgery. However, becoming a second wife can inextricably damage their reputations with other singers. At a Palapa concert in Lumajang, Nasha Aquila pointed out one of the singers. Fitriana sat by herself in a far corner, avoiding the other singers as much as she could. While the others chatted, laughed, and shared a hair straightener, Fitriana sat quietly with a lowered gaze.

Nasha elbowed me in the ribs to get my attention and explained that Fitriana had recently become the second wife of a male singer they all knew. They were not yet officially married, however. Nasha's eyes shown with anger as she told me that Fitriana was an example of a dangdut singer without class [I. *yang tidak berkelas*]. After the concert, as we sat in a restaurant eating meat soup and rice, Fitriana said she felt sick. Nasha launched into insincere gushing, claiming that Fitriana was surely pregnant, giving her all sorts of tips and tricks for finding out the sex of the baby. The more Nasha talked, the more Fitriana sank into her seat.

Most dangdut koplo singers of my acquaintance married in their twenties. Although some, like Utami Dewi Fortuna, remained unmarried longer and rarely discussed romantic relationships, I never heard a singer express opposition to marriage. Many singers did divorce young, however, and raised children with the support of their extended family and community, sometimes taking on a string of romantic partners. Some singers in this situation felt disappointment at their romantic situation and used tactics like wearing the hijab in their private lives to promote an image of piety and

purity. Lenny, for example, was recently divorced when I met her and had begun wearing the hijab in response to that situation. Manager and ex-singer Yuli, however, enjoyed her position as a divorcée because it allowed her financial control over her dangdut empire and the opportunity to court men who could provide business contacts and resources. When she caught her boyfriend flirting with other women, she did not hesitate to cut him out of her life and move on, kicking him out of her home and business.

Romance relationships are on the rise for dangdut singers, who can increasingly be open about their relationships. However, dangdut singers make it clear that marriage poses both risks and opportunities for their careers, well-being, and happiness. While some find life partners with whom they can build on their fame and success, others find abuse and limitations. Despite the risks, many singers still prioritize marriage and family, both because they see it as an inherent good and societal expectation and because marriage can provide some stability during and after their career, as I will discuss in the following section.

### Career Goals

Dangdut singers understand that, unless they reach superstar status like Inul Daratista and Rita Sugiarto, their careers have a limited lifespan. They try to increase that lifespan with clothing, plastic surgery, and diets, but even for regionally successful singers, the late thirties mark the end of their singing careers. Those who have not yet developed a regional name by their late twenties stop even earlier. Keeping this in mind, singers try to maximize what they can get out of their early years and parley that success into celebrity, diversified business interests, and a good marriage.

Singers take different strategies to ensure that their careers can flow smoothly into the rest of their lives. Many take the attitude of trying to maximize their income while they can. For some, like Desy Thata, that means being blunt about financial motivations. She uses her body's eroticism to its maximum capacity, dancing in miniskirts, tube tops, and Spanx. This strategy has risks; while her fame has spread quickly, more conservative event planners avoid hiring her and many industry professionals devalue her artistry. Most singers with the option to avoid this strategy do so because they recognize its limitations.

Many future-minded singers work on diversifying their revenue streams while they still have an income from singing. Dangdut is somewhat seasonal work, with large spans of time when jobs are few. The rainy season and the holy months of Ramadan and Suro are all periods when jobs are limited. Knowing this, singers invest or start other businesses so that they will have income even when there are no concerts. Many start small, selling clothing or food through social media. Others use the social capital they have established through singing to create and promote YouTube channels. Some go bigger, starting catering businesses or massage parlors. Ratna Antika owned a small tobacco plantation, while Yuli ran a business making veggie-flavored crackers with several employees. The ventures sometimes fail, but singers still invest, knowing that they will not always be young, and their careers as singers must end.

### **Labors of Pleasure, Labors of Sacrifice**

As outlined in the previous chapter, singers make a career of being objects of desire. They choose deliberately to fulfill the expectations of women who sing and dance

in front of men in Java. Doing so sometimes requires them to sacrifice their own desires by playing a role for fans, acquiescing to patron demands, lying to managers to make them happy. However, many singers feel ambivalent or even hostile towards those who desire them. They put up with this treatment because it allows them to pursue their own desires: artistic expression, financial security, and fame. The navigation of desire is complex, involving a delicate play of acquiescence and refusal, of allowing themselves to be desired and drawing a firm line to protect their own desires.

To understand singers' experiences, motivations, and how they position themselves, I analyze their experiences through the lenses of pleasure and sacrifice. Singers provide pleasure to others, but they also take great pleasure in their work, which gives them financial success, socio-economic mobility, the freedom to pursue artistry, travel, and fame, among other pleasures. That pleasure is deeply embodied as they stand, diva-like, in front of hundreds, and sometimes thousands of people, with no place for fear and insecurity.

At the same time, sacrifice is a recurring theme in both singers' narratives about themselves and their actions towards others. They sacrifice the freedom to lead a normal life for the economic wellbeing of their family. They sacrifice their bodies to elaborate and expensive regimens of whitening, plastic surgery, and weight loss and gain. They sacrifice time, privacy, and their reputations so that they can provide.

In the following sections I give examples of the actions they undertake and the ways they frame their experience, all for the sake of understanding why they become singers, how they balance the different expectations associated with their career, and how

they handle stigma, abuse, and the other stressors brought on by a career in dangdut koplo.

### Pleasure

While singers take pains to center narratives of sacrifice in their discourse, they also take pleasure in their work. They pursue their career because of the embodied pleasures it provides—singing beautifully, commanding a stage, moving their bodies in sensuous undulation—as well as the pleasure of making money, achieving fame, and simply being extraordinary. Their work also provide pleasure to others, as is easily attested by the thousands who attend concerts and dance. They symbolize the promise of additional pleasure, their attractive bodies and stunning clothing symbols of sexual satisfaction and economic success. Because the visual spectacle of men’s bodies dancing in dangdut audiences is striking, it’s understandable that many scholars have focused on male audience members and the pleasure they take in performance. Jeremy Wallach analyzes narratives about dangdut’s ability to *merakyat*, or be close to the people, as a unifying discourse of Indonesian-ness that relies on the “sensual pull” of women like Inul Daratista (Wallach 2014:288). In contrast, Henry Spiller, exploring the many situations in which men in the audience dance with each other in West Java, teases out the power relationships between male audience members and allows them to explore their own gender performance (Spiller 2013:23). In Spiller’s estimation, the women performing professionally must suspend their own desires and pleasure in the service of the event. Bettina David (2014:256–7) problematizes both views by pointing out that dangdut’s

multivalent nature—a seductive drumbeat and beautiful woman for a male audience combined with mournful lyrics berating men—may be the key to its success.

Other scholars address women’s performance but focus more on danger and reputation mitigation techniques than on pleasure. Weintraub analyzes dangdut video and song texts to show how superstars like Elvy Sukaesih and Inul Daratista presented themselves and maintained images of power in performance (Weintraub 2010, esp. chapters 5 and 7). Bader and Richter describe how *nyawer* encounters, when an audience member gives money directly to a singer, create a space of negotiation of power dynamics between singer and audience, wherein they are both on display (2014:176–9). In this section I wish to further eschew narrative binaries about liberation or exploitation by outlining how singers take pleasure in their own work. Similarly, I investigate the perspective of the singer’s pleasure instead of that of the audience. While some pleasures, like fame and wealth, are obvious and do not need extensive exploration. Other pleasures are subtler. While on the surface narratives of pleasure appear to counter singers’ descriptions of sacrifice, in fact the two are intimately related and even overlap.

### *Travel*

Many young Javanese women with limited economic opportunity rarely get the chance to travel. Singers frequently listed travel as one of the greatest pleasures of their work. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, travel also has its drawbacks and stresses for singers. However, learning to drive, seeing many cities and even countries, and getting the chance to engage in the leisure of tourism are unusual opportunities for women of

comparable socio-economic situation. Often, the travel is paid, and singers can engage in the middle-class activity of tourism for free.

The Indonesian government is highly invested in promoting both foreign and domestic tourism. Given the income from destinations like Bali, it is understandable that President Jokowi would espouse the goal to create ten new tourism destinations of Bali's caliber (KOMINFO 2017). These destinations do not only target international tourists. Between 2014 and 2018, domestic tourism trips increased by fifty million to a total of more than three hundred million (OECD 2020), compared to fifteen million international arrivals in 2018. Jokowi briefly proposed shortening the school week to four days to allow for domestic travel over long weekends.

Domestic tourism is still largely limited to the upper middle class and above, especially for single young women. However, the rise in social media has made tourism an even more desirable activity. Singers loved to list for me all the places they had traveled, and they showed me elaborately staged portraits in each location from their social media accounts. On social media, travel is synonymous with success, as viewers (and other singers) interpret extensive travel to indicate both wealth and being in high demand as a performer. In Chapter 3, I explore the connections singers see between physical mobility and socio-economic mobility in their careers.

### *Beauty and Style*

Dangdut singers take pleasure in beauty, both in working towards it and in creating, recording, and disseminating their own beautiful image. Dian, an MC for the television show *Stasiun Dangdut* and hobby singer herself, told me, "To be successful, a



singer must have two things: a good voice and a face that looks good on the poster.”

Because of the high stakes of image making in dangdut, singers work hard to fit the standard of beauty applied to dangdut. I will thus discuss beauty as a pleasure here, and later in the chapter return to beauty and sacrifice.

Beauty standards, as a set of aesthetic judgements influenced by social hierarchies and media, are constantly changing. During 2017 and 2018, the beauty standards for dangdut koplo singers in East Java were as follows: creamy, smooth white skin, high cheekbones, pointy chins, narrow noses, bright eyes with light-colored irises, thick lashes, dark brows, long, straight, thick black hair, tall, and a curvy-but-slim figure, with full hips and breasts (Figure 26). These standards are drawn from observations, but also from what singers would say about themselves, the negative comparisons they drew between their own appearance and someone else’s, and the elements of their appearance they discussed altering or desiring to alter.



*Figure 26: Singers Safira Delonge, Rere Amora, Ratna Antika, Devi Aldiva, Rena Movies, and Anjar Augustin pose backstage at a concert. Photo courtesy of Bunda Mintul, February 2019.*

On the surface, many of these standards seem to reflect a racist, or at least colorist, global racial hierarchy: pale skin, narrow noses, light eye colors tempted me at first to read these standards as holdouts from European colonialism or a result of U.S. media and pop culture. In fact, the use of skin whitening products and certain kinds of plastic surgery (double-eyelid and nose narrowing, for example) have received significant attention over the last twenty years from journalists and scholars from many disciplines, some of whom view it as an attempt to change race (Chaipraditkul 2013) or an internalization of colorism (Abdi et al 2021). However, these views overlook women's

expressed motivations, and by so doing ignore the wealth of global influences that have an impact on women's beauty standards, overestimate the impacts of colonialism and imperialism in Indonesia, and rob women of the nuanced agency they possess. As Zane (1998) and others have pointed out, ignoring what women themselves say about the beauty procedures they choose and insisting on their internalized racism and white hegemony reifies a patriarchal Western gaze which assumes its own centrality. How can an Indonesian woman be attempting to be "white" when not only does she not define white the same way a Caucasian American (or indeed an Asian American) may, she has not bought into the idea that she is not herself already white?

In Indonesia, desiring pale skin does not necessarily equate with wanting to change race. In fact, racialized ideas of whiteness identifying a "white," "Caucasian" race, ideas which shape racial relationships in Europe and North America, are largely absent from Indonesia. As L. Ayu Saraswati points out, narratives equating white, pale skin with feminine beauty have been present in the archipelago ever since the Old Javanese version of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* in the late ninth to early tenth century. Saraswati argues that before colonialism, racial and ethnic consciousness was minimal. During early Dutch colonialism, female Dutch migration was discouraged and even prohibited. As a result, Dutch colonizers were encouraged to keep concubines [*J. nyai*], which eventually created a class of "Indo" mixed-race children, "who could be legally classified as 'European' if the European father legally acknowledged the child" (Saraswati 2013:42), which blurred the boundaries between colonizer and colonized as described by Ann L. Stoler (1989). Saraswati argues that during this period, and perhaps

still today, Indo women were held up as the epitome of beauty (2013:42). When Dutch women began to migrate with their husbands after the mid-nineteenth century, colonizers began to emphasize the racial hierarchy more strongly, holding up Caucasian Dutch women as the model of “white” beauty. This racial project was unevenly applied, however; as Stoler points out, the legal category of “European” in the Netherlands Indies included “Japanese, Jews, Arabs, Armenians, Filipinos, naturalized Javanese, Sudanese wives of Dutch-born bureaucrats, recognized children of mixed marriages, and Christian Africans” (Stoler 2010:39). Dutch attempts to equate white beauty with racial whiteness were further complicated by Japanese colonialism during 1942–1945, during which time Japanese colonizers attempted to redefine white beauty as an ideal Asian beauty. Thus, white skin maintained its position as the aesthetically preferred color, but whiteness did not necessarily refer to race (Saraswati 2013:56–57).

This analysis is in keeping with what many Asian and Asian American women express about cosmetic surgery and whiteness. They do not see whitening treatments and cosmetic surgeries through a racialized lens, with global Asian others imitating Caucasian beauty norms or, at worst, attempting to change race or perceptions of racialized identity. A substantial and growing literature counters the view that whitening and other treatments represent attempts to change race, pointing out the hypocrisy of analyzing whitening through a racial lens while not doing the same for tanning treatments common in the United States and Europe. As Dredge Byung’chu Kang writes of whitening and cosmetic surgery in Thailand, whiteness is associated with being “neat, orderly, completed, and properly groomed,” more about social status and managing social

interactions than about beauty per se or beauty alone (Kang 2021:272). Miller (2021) and Elfving-Hwang (2021) show that cosmetic surgery in Japan and South Korea does not mimic Caucasian white beauty standards, but rather enhances what are considered to be desirable characteristics of their own nation and ethnicity. Nikki Khanna points out that, although skin whitening's connection to race may be debated, it is clearly an example of colorism, a "practice of discrimination whereby light skin is privileged over dark" (2020:4), which in areas like Japan clearly predate European imperialism. "Asian-white" appearance is associated with wealth and status (2020:12).

According to Saraswati, the privatization of television changed advertisements for whitening products. As more foreign films and TV series flooded the airways, Indonesia was exposed to whiteness not just from America, but also narratives that privileged light skin in shows and advertisements from India and Mexico. In response, local television worked to define an Indonesian white beauty, often leveraging imagery of traditional landscapes, homes, and clothing to do so (2013:77) and using Indo women—women of mixed Indonesian and European descent—as the main models. The ideal beauty was thus not racially white, but an in-between Indonesian whiteness. I'm not wholly satisfied by Saraswati's explanation here: that Indo women represented Indonesian ideals in that Indonesians value both traditional and modern culture? Or that Indonesians see themselves as absent from a racial spectrum? Or, in a tangent, she sees this kind of whiteness as a resistance to Euro-centric definitions of who is white. A refusal to be defined as not white. According to Saraswati, this grew into the current ideal, which she calls "cosmopolitan whiteness," defined as "no longer just 'Caucasian white' as in the

Dutch colonial period, nor ‘Japanese white’ as during the occupation, nor ‘Indonesian white’ as in the decades following independence, but something more complicated” that cannot be analyzed as ethnically or racially-based (2013:83–84). In Saraswati’s view, this whiteness is represented as embodying cosmopolitanism and transnational mobility. She writes, “cosmopolitan whiteness is a signifier without a racialized, signified body [...which] can and has been modeled by women from Japan to South Korea to the United States” (2013:85). While cosmopolitanism, the orientation of being a citizen of the world, can be ahistorical, as Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns writes, “a free-floating word used to advocate benevolent pro-world citizenship” (2015:39), I interpret Saraswati’s use of the word cosmopolitan to indicate something aspirational, framed as a personal ideal towards which to strive rather than an explicit political ideology.

I agree with Saraswati that, rather than beauty standards that promote European-ness or a white race, current standards promote a kind of global, pan-whiteness. This is not to say that race and racialization has no impact on these categories. They are mutually constitutive, as I will discuss in the section on sacrifice. However, it is not as simple as Indonesians accepting European definitions of beauty, and to assert as much strips Indonesians of power and history of context. Today skin whitening advertisements almost never showcase European or American women. Indonesian beauty standards today emphasize whiteness of skin rather than whiteness of race. Models and celebrities from Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea dominate advertisements, promoting a kind of pan-Asian cosmopolitanism in which whiteness or fairness of skin tone is more important than ethnicity or nationality. In fact, part of the appeal of these celebrities is

their ability to transcend national boundaries. The use of English in advertising works similarly. White skin and English language representing cosmopolitanism seems to reify and reproduce a West-centric world order, but the meanings are complicated by the fact that the ideal English-speaking beauty is now South Korean or Singaporean rather than North American or European.

In addition to showing global, cosmopolitan engagement with the world, the words used in beauty advertisements reveal what women hope to achieve by buying the product. For example, advertisements for Wardah cosmetics, an Indonesian beauty brand marketed heavily on national television, use words like “bright” [I. *cerah*], “full of light” [I. *bercahaya*], “clean” [I. *bersih*], “fresh” [I. *segar*], and “visible” [I. *tampak*] in addition to *putih*, the word for white, and the English-derived word “glowing.” Saraswati argues this language has long affectively tied lightness, brightness, and whiteness to virtue, wisdom, and beauty in Indonesia. She writes, “conflation and borrowing of meanings attached to ‘lightness’ and ‘brightness’ to signify the color of white [...] the concept of bright (*terang*) has been used to highlight enlightenment, new consciousness, and a progression away from ‘darkness’ (*gelap*), which has been framed as something that is undesirable” (2013:64).

The incongruences between white racial identity and white beauty were further evidenced by what people expected of me as an aspiring singer in dangdut koplo space. While singers and others around me considered many of my features passable under their ideal of beauty—my nose and the skin on my face in particular—other aspects remained targets of beauty regimes. Salespeople, massage therapists, and even close friends tried to

convince me to use skin whitening treatments. One neighborhood woman told me they would help to get rid of my freckles, which—she was convinced—were caused by eating pork. She also recommended I dye my hair black to be more beautiful and exclaimed when I came back from a beach trip one afternoon, “Andrea, you’re black!” using the word black [I. *hitam*] to indicate not literal color nor race but the degree of sun damage I’d suffered. This goes to show that while colonial and U.S. imperialist understandings of race surely influence whiteness as an ideal, Indonesian ideals of white beauty are not fully based on the construct of racial whiteness.

Of course, just because women do not see themselves as playing into racial, colonial, and gendered power structures in their beauty rituals does not mean those frameworks have no role in shaping beauty standards. In keeping with my framing combining practice theory with performance theory to analyze both how women deliberately craft their identities through performance and the framework in place that limits and shapes their performance, I will further address how social class, consumption, and most notably, gender, relate to beauty standards in the section about beauty and sacrifice.

What pleasures do women get from pursuing beauty standards? In this section I will outline the pleasures I witnessed most often among dangdut singers. Unlike many narratives about beauty, I rarely saw singers treat beauty as something relaxing or as a leisure activity. They were more likely to frame the pleasures of beauty through several related ways. First, singers described their beauty regimens as self-improvement, self-maintenance, and an expression of self-control. Singers framed their efforts to be



beautiful as a social or even religious obligation, one that shows to outside viewers their inner control, piety, enlightenment, and social awareness, while also reflecting and allowing an orientation toward modernity, enlightenment, and empowerment.

For singers of dangdut koplo, and indeed for many women generally in Indonesia, beauty is not a matter of luxury or leisure. Beauty rituals are part of an effort towards constant self-improvement. Expected of women in general in addition to dangdut singers, such efforts toward self-improvement are framed through several different lenses, most prominently social and economic mobility, social pressure to keep up with friends, and even a religious imperative to be beautiful. This is in keeping with what other scholars observe about beauty practices, including plastic surgery and skin whitening, in Southeast Asia. Dredge Byung'chu Kang points out that in Thailand, “bodily enhancements are not optional practices, but social responsibilities linked to the appropriate cultivation and presentation of the self that demonstrates actual and aspirational class status” (Kang 2021:273). Argues that whiteness is a class indicator, and that sensing socio-economic class is fundamental to harmonious social relations. “One’s social position [...] is thus interpreted through dress, language, manner, and other factors that point to the presentation of what might as well be true. The judgement of appropriate action is not based on abstract notions of equality or morality, but rather on contextually specific circumstances and expectation” (2021:276). Self-presentation is seen as a manifestation of inner state and social position. By adjusting appearance and presentation, they can materialize their desired status. It also shows self-awareness and wisdom, as people are expected to maintain an appearance in keeping with their sense of social standing. Kang

writes, “Anyone who has the financial means to transform is expected to engage in the labour of self-care, to improve oneself. Transformation is not simply a choice but an expectation, like proper daily grooming before presenting oneself in public [...] not following through was akin to laziness or misbehavior” (2021:278). Beauty is thus a responsibility tied to social obligations, and fulfilling those obligations shows the world not only a beautiful face but also good character.

Beautification also performs class status, both actual and aspirational. Kang points out that when posted conspicuously on social media or through sharing before and after photos, beauty practices demonstrate social class distinction through access to consumption and the time necessary for self-care and cultivation. Saraswati describes how whitening products in Indonesia are advertised to produce feelings of cosmopolitanism, connection to a broader pan-Asian whiteness, “transcending race and nation” (2013:98). The transnational circulation of these advertising images promotes ideas about what kinds of women can travel, and so ties beauty to mobility and cosmopolitanism, but also to whiteness, lightness, and brightness. Susan Ossman outlines a similar association of lightness with enlightenment and thus with movement. She describes women in Cairo removing Islamic coverings that made them feel heavy and enclosed, while women in Paris obsessively tried to stay slim to achieve the same thing. She writes, “The ‘freedom’ that allows one to move about the apparently universal, unfolded map of the body is indeed a world of lightness—not only of symbolic, but also of bodily lightness [...] heaviness seems easily held in place [...] en-lightened women are on the move” (Ossman 2002:19–20).

The association between light, lightness, enlightenment, movement, and class/global mobility has many resonances in Indonesian beauty standards, though the exact standards differ. In the last thirty years, donning Islamic head coverings has meant not heaviness or immobility in Indonesia, but rather an engagement with international fashion styles, global consumption, and enlightenment through self-improvement and piety. Hijabers are coded as cosmopolitan, stylish, and consumption-oriented. As Carla Jones discusses of pious fashion in Indonesia, self-presentation through consumption of goods coded as pious allows Indonesian Muslims—and particularly women—to perform “ethical lives, both to themselves and to others” (Jones 2010b:618). While considered by some to be hypocritical, Jones argues that “desirability and piety are not mutually exclusive” (Jones 2010a:92). In fact, many women brought up a popularly referenced hadith to justify their beautification efforts as Islamic. While singers did not reference the hadith by name, I believe they refer to Sunan an-Nasa’I, *The Book of Marriage*, Hadith 3231, which reads:

It was narrated that Abu Hurairah said: “It was said to the Messenger of Allah: ‘Which woman is best?’ He said: ‘The one who makes him happy when he looks at her, obeys him when he commands her, and she does not go against his wishes with regard to herself nor her wealth.’” (Sunan An-Nasa’i 3231)

As Muhammad Ali pointed out to me, any given hadith may be known or not known, interpreted textually or contextually, or even dismissed as irrelevant. I do not argue that this hadith is in any way binding in a particular interpretation. However, I often noted how dangdut koplo singers loosely referenced this hadith to justify not just makeup and fashion, but more extreme beauty practices like plastic surgery and skin whitening treatments.

The 1998 dangdut song “Gadis Miskin,” or “Poor Young Woman,” recorded by Evie Tamala shows an example of this interpretation of the relationship between beauty and piety.

<p>Kalau kecantikan wajah kau harap dariku          Tak mungkin kau dapati, tiada kumiliki          Karena dalam hidupku orang yang tak          punya...          Sebagai seorang wanita hatiku pun ingin          Menghias diri ini seperti yang lain          Namun apa dayaku, ku orang tak mampu          Jangankan baju yang indah, pupur pun tak          punya...</p>	<p>If you just want a beautiful face          There’s no way I can give you that, I          don’t have it          Because I live an impoverished life...          Like any woman, my heart also wants          To make myself up like other women          But what power do I have? I am not          capable of this          Not only do I not have beautiful clothes, I          don’t even have face whitening powder.</p>
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Both the lyrics and the vocal technique tie this song to a vision of a poor but pious Muslim woman who only wants to do her duty to her husband: be loyal, be beautiful. She is humble and not vain, as befits a poor young woman, which makes her a most attractive possible wife. Yet she also acknowledges that all women want to be beautiful, and that just like the others, when given the opportunity, she will make herself so by using makeup and beautiful clothing. Framed this way, this poor young woman is the ideal potential wife. Evie Tamala, a singer known for refinement and a smooth, relaxing voice, coos the lyrics gently and submissively. While not yet beautiful, the protagonist will be

both beautiful and loyal once the right man sweeps her off her feet. On the words “Make myself up” [*I. menghias diri ini*], Evie Tamala employs an elaborate *cengkok*, showing off her training in Qur’anic recitation. To be beautiful, and to use cosmetics and clothing to become so, is Islamic and correct, and socio-economic condition is all that stops her. In this song, the best version of the young virgin, even the true version, is the one with makeup.

This brings me back to the question of authenticity. As the song above shows, even the most pious women accept makeup as both desirable and necessary to achieve beauty. For dangdut koplo singers, this orientation towards self-improvement and openness about plastic surgery and other kinds of modifications means that singers do not bother to promote authenticity, genuineness, or naturalness as part of their appearance. This is especially clear for dangdut singers who represent a type of “extreme beauty,” a term Kang applies to trans women in Thailand (Kang 2021:273). Because their beauty is meant to be consumed on a mass scale, and because they must be recognizable as fulfilling already established dangdut norms, the beauty standard to which dangdut singers aspire is not the same as the average Indonesian woman. This leads many dangdut singers to extremes in the pursuit of beauty, as not only are they expected to be extremely beautiful; they must also demonstrate for the public an extreme commitment to the processes of beautification. Later in the chapter, I will show how dangdut singers perform glamour labor for public consumption through social media, and frame beauty as sacrifice by doing so.

Dressing Dangdut

Dangdut clothing gets a bad rap. As I mentioned in the introduction, one of dangdut's main identifiers is, to paraphrase a non-Indonesian friend, all the little girls in ball gowns. Nor is the disdain for dangdut fashion limited to foreigners; one Indonesian TV writer told me, "If you see a woman on a motorcycle in the kampung, dressed in sequins and feathers with way too much makeup, she's definitely a dangdut singer. They are always too much [I. *berlebihan*]." These comments reveal an aesthetic disdain rooted in social class bias. Dangdut koplo fashion is significant not only because of the significant labor singers put into styling themselves and projecting an identity; it also reflects and influences fashion at the national level. In draw from Niessen, Leshkovich, and Jones, who argue that by analyzing clothing choices—how individuals dress at certain moments—they can "reveal the relationship between individual choices, themselves subject to varying degrees of constraint or agency, and larger interests, such as nations, corporations, and markets, that are invested in individuals performing in particular ways" (Niessen, Leshkovich, and Jones 2003:6). In this section, I will explore how singers style themselves using close ethnography, while also considering the bigger picture: how social class bias renders dangdut aesthetics an object of both disdain and consumption, and how dangdut fashion design is in fact inseparable from the Indonesian fashion industry at large.

Dangdut clothing is a significant investment. Good signature styling can mark the difference between a pretty voice and a superstar. Nasha Aquila once warned me that I must wear a different outfit for every show, because the recordings would go on YouTube and people would catch on if I wore the same clothing again and again.

However, most singers, especially those starting out, do not have the capital to buy high-end fashion. They shop at low-end malls and markets or on social media at first, eventually hiring designers and seamstresses when they can afford it. When Nasha Aquila wanted to support the career of a younger singer, she sold her heavily discounted clothing she no longer used. Some, like Niken Aprilia, even design their own clothing, thereby guaranteeing a unique style and good fit (Figure 27).



*Figure 27: Niken Aprilia performing on Stasiun Dangdut in a couture batik outfit of her own design. Photo by the author.*

Nasha was surprised when I expressed interest in dangdut material culture. “Where do you shop?” I asked as we had our first meal together at D’Kos Seafood, Royal Plaza Mall. “Right here!” She gushed. She showed me down a few floors to two tiny dress stalls. They were packed floor to ceiling with glitter and sequins. Tops, mini dresses

and long gowns made as cheaply as possible and selling at negotiable prices for only a few dollars. As we perused the offerings, she pointed out to me styles worn by certain singers. “Oh, that is Ratna Antika’s style!” She’d exclaim. She insisted that I buy a dress and a top in preparation for some upcoming concerts. The total cost was around USD\$12.

When they shop, singers are thinking about forms of presentation and the body. They consume from local markets, both mass-produced and custom-made. They follow each other in performance practice (those blue gowns with full skirts and sequins), and so local influence is strong, but they also look to Indonesian and South Korean celebrities for inspiration. As Niessen, Leshkovich, and Jones point out, “the supposedly global and local in Asian dress are intertwined, interdependent, and mutually determining” (2003:5). Unlike the Yogyakarta youth Brent Luvaas describes as creating their own DIY fashion in a rejection of consumer culture, dangdut singers have no problem with consumerism. However, they are acutely aware of how their consumption contributes to construction of their brand as singers. To paraphrase Andrew Weintraub and Bart Barendregt, they “play with ideas of ‘glamour’ (defined as dressing up, allure, and enchantment), ‘camp’ (artifice and exaggeration), and ‘kitsch’ (sentimentality and melodrama) for strategic ends” (Weintraub and Barendregt 2017:15). In fact, it is their very embrace of consumer culture that makes them targets for ridicule; their overly glamorous gowns, tacky makeup. Weintraub (2010:114) argues that dangdut’s lyrics and visuals create a “spectacle of excess,” following Roland Barthes, but one full of possibilities for multiple interpretations. The clothing is part of this heightened sense of theatricality, but it’s also what distinguishes dangdut from higher class genres or genres considered international.



Frantz Fanon writes, “It is by their apparel that types of society first become known,” pointing out how the veil in Algeria became the primary target of colonial efforts under the belief that removing the veil meant liberating women, and where women went, society would follow. Their professional attire, though not always reflecting their personal preferences and habits, makes dangdut singers known to their own society, as my television writer acquaintance pointed out.

As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues, responses to cultural objects, chalked up to taste, are in fact based on understanding and reifying codes of social class. Alexis L. Boylan pushes this argument one step further, arguing that in Bourdieu’s estimation the cultural object itself is relatively stable, and only the perceptions of it changes. Kitsch is still kitsch, but what that quality means to different people varies. In contrast, Boylan sees kitsch as a fluid concept. Boylan argues that the idea of kitsch is a reaction to modernity, and that modernity is inherently racialized (and gendered and sexualized) (Boylan 2010:46). As a result, there is no stability of form in cultural objects, nothing is inherently kitsch, because the meanings of the object come wholly from response to it, and those responses are fundamentally different based on (in Boylan’s argument) race. Is dangdut koplo kitsch? For me to call it thus would be beyond the point, since kitsch is only in the eye of the beholder, but analyzing upper-class responses to dangdut through the lens of kitsch is productive. William Frederick called the interest of upper middle class Indonesians who contextually enjoy dangdut “populist chic,” as they believed dangdut had the power to reveal something fundamental about the people and thus the countenance of Indonesia (1982:124). Andrew Weintraub points out discourse among

elite Indonesians that dangdut expresses the culture of the people, a “social barometer,” even a form of psychotherapy capable of repressing feelings of frustration (Weintraub 2010:144). This sounds very much as though the upper class interprets dangdut’s excess emotion, overacting, and overdressed-ness as a kind of kitsch, a response to pressures of modernity. But what of the singers themselves?

Singers like those discussed in this chapter, who have reached moderate regional success, find themselves at a social class crossroads in their clothing. Most singers come from the same social class as their target audience, but with their dress they must embody beauty and fantasy. However, their very efforts to embody glamour mark them as out of touch with the codes of the elite. The ballgowns expected of singers at wedding celebrations in Pati do not serve them in music videos that will spread across all levels of society, and so they must master casual chic, imitating pop stars or social media influencers. National television presents an additional obstacle; only the best Jakarta designers will do, and the dresses carefully made by local seamstresses are coded as tacky, cheap, and *kampungan*. This is further complicated by the way fashion constantly changes, responding to markets and pop culture.

Singers are sharply attuned to shifts in fashion and what is contextually appropriate. They recognize that, much like trending songs, fashion and styling must be studied and developed. Singers wear different styles depending on the type of event and the songs they anticipate singing (though these are always subject to change). For formal evening events and melancholy songs, glamorous dresses in jewel tones with sequins and feathers were de rigueur in 2018. For afternoon shows, casual outfits with platform shoes

were acceptable. Singers also consider what song they'll be singing (if they're lucky enough to know in advance) and plan their outfit to fit the mood. Likewise, singers keep track of recent trends. When Via Vallen broke onto the scene in casual clothes, expressing a laid-back, cosmopolitan orientation, fashions immediately became less formal. Happy Asmara and other recent stars have pivoted to much less formal fashion. Showing the proper degree of formality demonstrates good breeding, education, and social class position as well as access to the right goods and brands.

Because clothing can mean the difference between success and failure, singers clothe themselves carefully and deliberately. They take special care when they will appear on television or compete, as they are judged on clothing and styling in addition to singing. In 2018, a video of superstar Iis Dahlia went viral. In it, she was berating a young woman auditioning for the dangdut singing competition show KDI for wearing ugly clothing. The public outcry was significant; how dare she shame a contestant for her clothing when the contestant is there to sing? However, that video reflected the emphasis on physical appearance common to dangdut singing shows.

Lenny believes that styling and clothing led to one of her big contest wins on television.

Lenny: I was a singer, but I also had many friends in production. There was a tribute to Rita Sugiarto, and I really wanted to be part of it. Fortunately, I had wonderful friends in production who got me in. I was already in makeup at three in the morning. The plane was taking off at six, but by three I was already in makeup. When we arrived, the others were still getting into makeup. I'd already done hair and makeup in Surabaya, my hair tied back and formed into a shape like this. And I had an outfit. To be honest, I rented it. It was free, I didn't pay

anything. I won first place, and Ivan Gunawan<sup>15</sup> said my outfit was good and that I was clearly ready to become a singer. I won Rp6.000.000. The audition went like this: there were eleven of us in a closed room. “Okay, you go ahead and enter.” Then you sing right away, and they tell you whether you’ll sing that night. We were being chosen. They had us all stand up, and the presenters chose me to go first because my outfit was the best. They asked me to sing, and I got Rp6.000.000. The others didn’t pass. I got it, mainly because my outfit was so good. It really was cool, and it was less modest than [I. *buka-buka*],<sup>16</sup> this short and made from batik. I got six juta. And then I got invited back a month later for the Elvy Sukaesih tribute and received ten juta!

The pleasure of developing a unique style and wearing beautiful clothing is one that dangdut celebrity grants. Though many singers find it exhausting work, it is also one of the thrills of celebrity and a way to generate additional income.

Increasingly, dangdut koplo singers participate in the fashion industry through social media. With their vast following, dangdut singers can attract brand sponsorships. Brands give them free clothes or pay them money to create a compelling Instagram post advertising clothing or beauty products. As digital influencers, who monetize their online presence through advertisements, sponsored content, brand partnerships, and (in Indonesia) reselling products, dangdut singers “simultaneously assume the roles of cultural producer, model, and consumer while implicitly embodying the fashionable ideal” (Perthuis and Findlay 2019). They are not merely consumers in fashion industries. Dangdut koplo singers invest great amounts of time and money into what Elizabeth A. Wissinger calls glamour labor, the production of that fashionable ideal. At the same time,

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<sup>15</sup> Ivan Gunawan is an eminent fashion designer and television personality in Indonesia. Besides running fashion design companies that specialize in everything from ready-to-wear to elaborate wedding gowns, he also appears on dangdut singing competition shows as a fashion critic.

<sup>16</sup> Lenny began wearing a hijab after her divorce. When women begin to wear the hijab, they often refer to modest clothing as closing off their *aurat* [I. *menutup aurat*]. Clothing that does not meet hijaber standards, for example that shows the legs, upper arms, or chest, is referred to as open clothing [I. *pakaian dibuka*].

their digital efforts are mainly targeted toward increasing their in-person bookings, as those are the gigs that pay best. They also embody an aesthetic that is both local and conditional on their labor as dangdut singers.

Social media analysis also reveals the industry connections between fashion and dangdut. Ivan Gunawan, mentioned above by Lenny, is perhaps the most famous Indonesian fashion designer, with a thriving wedding dress business and consulting for beauty pageant contestants. He also serves as a fashion critic for dangdut singing competition shows on the channel MNCTV. Both in East Java and in Jakarta studios, the same designers and makeup artists work with dangdut singers as with beautiful women not considered kitsch: supermodels, actresses, and beauty pageant contestants. The artificial division between industries and aesthetics is due to discrimination against women of lower socio-economic class striving for glamour, not the actual aesthetics themselves.

While singers hesitate to discuss it, many also find pleasure in showing off their beautiful bodies. They do this both onstage and on social media. By showing off, I do not only mean that they expose flesh, though they certainly do relative to the Indonesian population in general. I also mean the perfect confidence and power with which they move their bodies onstage. The best and most experienced singers transform onstage into figures who command attention. They must project pleasure in the music and the movement of their own bodies, because, as any performer knows, if you yourself are not enjoying what you're doing, the audience senses it.

## *Music*

As shown above, singers hesitate to say outright that they love to perform. Both in their narratives about themselves and in their physical movements, they act as though they could take or leave performing, as though it is only a means to an end or a necessary sacrifice. Both Rere and Nasha only admitted they enjoyed performing after enumerating their economic necessity and responsibility. Of course, they take pleasure in the music; audiences can immediately detect if one does not. They all enjoy the music, the rush of performance, the feeling of being in command of an audience.

Because singers do not talk about this pleasure, my evidence is based on my kinesthetic sense of their voices and bodies. Before they step onto the stage, singers make a studied effort to appear relaxed and disinterested. They lean back if they can, lower back pressed into the seat back, while their upper backs and shoulders round forward, faces gazing down at their cellphones, legs relaxed and sprawled open. This studied relaxation is in fact a form of guardedness. They focus on their cellphones, posting selfies, checking what their competitors are up to, or even memorizing song lyrics at the last moment. Some make final adjustments to their hair or makeup. More established singers chat with each other, but lower status singers, feeling their position, often keep to themselves. When they are called to the stage, they play at surprise and reluctance. Despite having been previously informed about her position in the lineup, the singer looks up from her phone, seemingly surprised and even a little annoyed. She slips on her high-heeled shoes (Figure 28), checks her appearance one final time, and leans on a fellow singer to stand. She picks her way to the stage over cables and boxes, taking the

microphone from the last singer. Once she is standing at the front of the stage, however, she transforms. No longer hesitant and disinterested, her body and face open, her shoulders back, her eyes wide and up, smiling broadly. Here, she is in her element, unafraid to show perfect confidence and poise.



*Figure 28: Shoes onstage at a concert in Lumajang, waiting to be worn. Photo by the author.*

Beyond the pleasure of the music itself, singers take pride in their abilities. Singers describe the sensation of singing as inherently pleasurable (Figure 29). Unlike classic dangdut technique, which is often florid and emotional, dangdut koplo singers are praised for having voices that are clear [I. *jelas*], smooth [I. *halus*], or melodious [I. *merdu*]. The idealized clarity is markedly distinct from the ideals on dangdut television competition stages: a forward presence, resonating strongly in the nasopharyngeal

passages, with speech-like delivery. Nasha describes the sensation like this: “I open my mouth and I think, and the song flows out, just like I’m speaking.” Singers are also known for unique vocal skills. As Nasha explained to me, some singers might be known for having a rock or pop voice. She counted herself in that camp. Others had voices more suited to classic dangdut. All singers had to be ready to perform anything, but Nasha prided herself on the power of her voice. Rere, on the other hand, listened to classic Bollywood late into the night and hummed along, practicing to maintain the vocal flexibility and clarity for which she was famous. To brag was seen as gauche, but it was clear that singers took pride in their individual skills.





*Figure 29: Ratna Antika commands the stage in Lumajang, August 2018. Photo by the author.*

### *Providing (Family and Community)*

In the section about roots, I described how many singers frame their work as a necessity due to poverty, low wages, or other family conditions. For established singers, the ability to provide is a sign of power and prestige and a pleasure as well as a stressor. Dangdut singers self-consciously develop and maintain social connections and ties to the community and their families. The techniques with which singers build and maintain

these connections reminds me of “big man” politics, a term I use with kid gloves because of its vagueness and colonial history (as Lindstrom (1981) argues, it served as a temporary replacement for “chief” among anthropologists) and with some tongue-in-cheek, self-consciously calling attention to gendered assumptions surrounding the term. Keir Martin defines a big man as “a local village leader who achieves a position of influence through careful work in organising enduring relations of obligation among his followers” (Martin 2017:375). Marshall Sahlins argued that, unlike leaders with inherited power, big men of Melanesia built social influence by placing themselves at the center of a network of exchange obligations (1963).

Dangdut koplo singers who reach regional success fit these definitions. These big women enfold their families and communities into their labor, and in return have a bevy of assistance and strong community support. As the earner of the largest wage, Nasha Aquila set up a matrifocal household in Sidoarjo. She invited her Solonese mother and father to come live with her in a home purchased with dangdut earnings. Her sister moved to the neighborhood. Having set up homes for family members, Nasha relied on their support for childcare while she was on the road. Paijo, whose employment was uneven, would serve as her driver. Other singers would provide family and community members with jobs like makeup artist, bodyguard, tailor, even vehicle companion. This work fills needs for the singer and makes her life easier, but it also deliberately builds her support base.

As stated above, singers know their touring career is likely limited and so attempt to diversify their interests early. Drawing on the community and capital they have built,

singers invest or create their own businesses. By doing so, they have the pleasure of leading their own enterprise and being seen as a provider. Yuli, a singer who used her capital to become a band manager, also led other businesses that allowed her to lead economic development in her neighborhood in Trawas, East Java. After one visit, she sent me home with two large bags of freeze-dried and fried pea chips. “These are all organic,” she told me, “grown and made right here. I hired a lot of poor women in the community, and they work for me now, making organic snacks.” Yuli was clearly proud of this enterprise (and the snacks were very tasty). Yuli, Nasha, and others like them are concerned with much more than their own immediately economic security. They take pleasure knowing their family and friends will be provided for into the future, knowing that community safety also means less resentment against them and their extraordinary position in the community. In Chapter 5, I will continue to explore how and why dangdut industry professionals like Yuli set up systems of debt and patronage to shore up their economic and social interests.

An additional benefit of community building is that singers who achieve a certain degree of success achieve freedom from many gender norms that restrict other women. Freedom to travel, as outlined above, is one example. Another is freedom from many household responsibilities. While singers are often devoted mothers and wives, they rarely have the time or inclination for activities like cooking and cleaning. They rely on family members or, if they become successful enough, hire staff to handle those tasks. As household tasks almost invariably fall to women in Indonesia and take up much of their time, freedom from these responsibilities makes the lives of dangdut singers very

different from those of the average woman. Their labor as singers partly enables them to live such lives, but community and family connections are also crucial to this freedom.

### Sacrifice

When describing their paths as dangdut artists, singers emphasize the element of sacrifice. Rarely highlighting their own desires, they instead describe the needs their families faced and the responsibility they took on by becoming a singer. These narratives about self-sacrifice may certainly be true, as singers do sacrifice other options, reputations [*I. nama*], and relationships in the career they choose. However, these narratives also function as a denial of desire, ambition, or pleasure.

As Ward Keeler and others have discussed, one way to pursue and accrue power in Java is through asceticism, which Keeler defines as “a form of sacrifice in which, more paradoxically, one gives up aspects of oneself in order to gain personal rewards” (1987:45). While ascetic practice is often assumed to be an arena for men—the stereotype is that women are too caught up with practical responsibilities like home, food, and childcare—singers of dangdut koplo perform a kind of abnegation of self, both onstage and off, that reflects ascetic practice and in both the requirement of sacrifice—of food, company, sleep, money, and reputation—in order to acquire charisma, beauty, potency, and power. As described in the previous chapter, this practice has roots in traditional dance forms, connecting dangdut to narratives about Dewi Sri, the goddess who was murdered because of the danger of her beauty, and whose sacrifice resulted in the fertility of the earth and the gift of rice.

*Beauty: The Labor of Image and Becoming an Idol*

To feel beautiful is a signal pleasure, and many singers luxuriate in the pleasure of self-care and beauty treatments. However, as Eka Kurniawan shows in his famous novel *Cantik itu Luka* (2002), beauty can also be a wound, both because beauty standards continue to emphasize a mixed-race white appearance made fashionable by colonialism, imperialism, and rape, and because being beautiful makes a woman vulnerable to narratives like those about Dewi Sri, murdered to stamp out her dangerous beauty. Beyond the fraught histories of beauty standards in Indonesia discussed earlier, beauty standards exact a steep price from singers. They rely on misogynist, imperial, and unattainable standards and cost singers money, mental health, labor, and time.

Whitening, diets, and plastic surgery in the name of achieving a beauty standard require outlandish amounts of capital and labor, impact health, and reflect, if not Caucasian white supremacy, a neo-liberal obsession with consumption and social class distinction. As Nikki Khanna writes, skin whitening “is a multi-billion-dollar global industry” (2020:2). I argue above that the white beauty standard to which dangdut singers aspire is not purely due to Dutch colonialism. This is not to say that Dutch colonialism had no impact on the Indonesian racial imaginary, but I do argue that overstating its impact serves only to reify narratives of imperialism and European power. At the same time, beauty standards can be harmful and colorist even if they are not clearly based in or reifying colonial ideologies.

Second wave feminists, writing mainly from a U.S. and Euro-centric perspective, argued that beauty standards were a form of male domination. Naomi Wolf argues that

beauty ideologies use beauty as a weapon against women's advancement. In fact, as women gain more legal rights, images of beauty have come to weigh on us more heavily (1991:10). Beauty, in Wolf's estimation, does not exist at all, and instead functions like a currency that "keeps male dominance intact" (12). Sandra Bartky writes that beauty techniques and practices, the countless rituals required for women to fulfill beauty standards, are a way of disciplining their bodies in a Foucauldian sense. Exercise, restricting food, making themselves smaller in gesture and posture, removing hair, and otherwise denying the natural instincts and states of the body in the name of beauty equates femininity with disciplined, docile, and subordinate bodies. Because the discipline is "unbound" from authority, the sexual discrimination behind such discipline is made invisible. As a result, women seek out such discipline themselves (Bartky 1990:69-75). As I point out above, many women even take pleasure in aspects of the disciplining. More often, women buy into beauty methods, products, and techniques because of the cultural capital beauty provides.

Beauty ideologies shift constantly. Historically, beauty ideologies allow those who possess power to consolidate that power in the body. Soft hands and skin untouched by sunlight, for example, often emerge as beauty in many times and locations around the world, because these traits often indicated higher socio-economic status and privilege. The wealthy can thus claim access to beauty, which is then held to indicate superiority of temperament, behavior, intelligence, and even race. Beauty standards are constantly altered, either deliberately by power players or through capitalist markets, to make sure only the elite have access to beauty. As Mary Cathryn Cain argues, using whiteness to

assert morality, cleanliness, self-worth, and good character, as I describe singers doing in the section above, is not politically neutral. Writing of Antebellum America, Cain shows how white female beauty was used as a way for middle-class white women to “assert their moral leadership” (Cain 2008:28). While individual women of the time likely felt they were simply trying to be their best selves, those standards and selves reified a racist class structure.

Similarly, conspicuous consumption is increasingly the main way to pursue beauty. In this system, people purchase products that promise to bring them closer to beauty. The beauty industry simultaneously moves the goalposts by establishing new standards and fashions, thus milking people for money while keeping the goal—beauty—perpetually out of reach. Susan Douglas writes that 1980s advertisers and magazines spread a message that consumption meant liberation for women: “under the guise of telling women ‘you’re worth it,’ advertisers suggested we weren’t worth it at all but could feel we were, for a moment, if we bought the right product” (Douglas 2000:270). According to Douglas, these advertisements promise “narcissism as liberation” but deliver only self-hatred. Even more significantly, Mimi Thi Nguyen points out how narratives about the pleasures of beauty or the right to beauty have been leveraged to hold up imperial regimes. Nguyen lists beauty among truth, freedom, etc., as “transactional categories that are necessarily implicated and negotiated in relation to national and transnational contests of meaning and power” (2011:361). The promise of beauty is not a neutral one.

Singers of dangdut koplo are not only consumers of beauty products; they are also parts of the industry. Singers sell beauty products on social media and create their own beauty lines. They do so both to promote their own business interests and as part of their persona as *artis*.

### Styling

Singers put considerable effort into styling for shows. The process is all the more formidable because most sleep, dress, and put on makeup in the back of a moving vehicle. While touring with the band OM Pallapa, I asked Nasha Aquila to show me her process for getting ready for a show at a wedding. Sitting in the home of the parents of the bride, we tucked into a few corner seats between plates of snacks. While the other singers joked and took out their curlers (Figures 30 and 31), Nasha walked me through her makeup process.

Fieldnotes August 23: Hair is straightened before leaving. Foundation, eyeliner. White powder for setting or whitening. False eyelashes. Actually just fixing those up—eyes first, eyeshadow and eyebrow darkener. White liner for the inner parts of the eyes, so they pop. Eyeliner again. Shading on the nose so it looks more *mancung* [E. pointy]. Eyeshadow again, dark this time. Mascara, upper and lower. Blush. Blush around the bottom of the jaw as well. She says my fake eyelashes aren't any good. The ends are too even, so they'll look fake.





*Figure 30: Selly Monica works on the setlist while other singers get ready for a show. Lumajang, August 2018. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 31: Fitriana getting ready for the same show. Lumajang, August 2018. Photo by the author.*

Nasha then showed me what a good pair of false lashes looked like, with fluffy lashes of different lengths. I recall that the next moment she offered me some of her old false eyelashes, then paused to ask if I'd ever worn them before. When I answered that I hadn't, she pressed them into my hand and gestured toward my sad makeup bag.

“Don't wear them tonight, honey bear,” she said. “Take them home and practice. They're painful when you're not used to them. Your eyes will dry out.”

Having the right makeup and the right look take up an inordinate amount of time for singers, who are constantly on the lookout for new trends and good deals. Even more

than this, their appearance must be always fresh and beautiful despite having showered at the Pertamina gas station and gotten ready in the car between shows.

In the section about pleasure, I described how many singers enjoy developing their own personal style. Clothing and style can also cost a prohibitive amount of money and be a cause of stress. They face constant pressure to innovate and keep up with trends. From time to time these trends come into conflict with their personal moral and religious codes. In 2018, clothing was expected to be relatively modest for mainstream singers. Cleavage and exposed bellies were largely avoided, even for club singers. After showing me portraits from ten years earlier, Nasha explained that styles shifted from less modest to more modest. I wrote about the conversation:

Fieldnotes September 22: Nasha says the clothing has changed. Back when she sang as a *bintang tamu* [guest star] in clubs, they only wore crop tops and short skirts. She phrased the change as not due to religious restrictions, but rather to dangdut improving in class. The manager of Don Dong<sup>17</sup> expressed the same—it's sexier to “play eyes.”

These changes reflect the perennial efforts from producers, government officials, and even singers themselves to help dangdut *naik kelas*, or appeal to the upper middle class. In the years since, however, skirts have once again gotten shorter and some women show cleavage. While singers like Utami Dewi Fortuna relished the opportunity to show off midriffs and shoulders without shame, others chafed against the new fashions, seeing them as morally bankrupt attempts to get easy followers during pandemic restrictions.

## Social Media

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<sup>17</sup> I here refer to a club in the historic red light district Dolly. Known as Don Dong, this club is the last remaining dangdut club in that neighborhood.

What can we make of this figure who exists, it seems, solely in the image, the fashionable ideal apparently come to life among us? In what ways does her idealized lifestyle preclude the very limits that make her existence possible? For example, we see the cavalcade of places she poses in, but none of the journey taken to travel there. The endless feed of filtered photographs regularly repopulates with new posts, but the labor that produces it is invisible. Her body therefore is rendered non-human, an idealized fashionable persona excised from the constraints of gravity and jet lag, and also from the marks and wear commonly perceptible on human bodies. (Perthuis and Findlay 2019:221).

Singers are expected to be in constant contact with other industry professionals and high-profile fans on social media. In fact, besides maintaining their own beauty, social media is likely the most labor-intensive activity in which they engage. When not onstage, singers work several hours a day at creating content, live-streaming, or otherwise engaging with fans. Spending all this time on social media and creating for social media means singers are expected to look beautiful all the time.

I wrote in my fieldnotes on August 19, 2018:

I've learned the proper behavior surrounding selfies—you're supposed to give them willingly, with the logic that you are making other people really happy. There's also a system—you take the phone so that you can control your image. You get to control your best angles, etc., and this is common knowledge. They know that's what is expected.

For months, I had wondered why dangdut fans would hand me their cellphone when they wanted a selfie with me. After observing singers interacting with fans at the Monata Mania Family Gathering, I saw that fans did this out of consideration for singers, realizing that singers want to control their own image by finding the best lighting and angles. Fans want the image to show the singer at her best, as such images get more likes and better promote social status. Fans also recognize that singers make social media images professionally, and they defer to singers' abilities.

Lighting, angles, expression, and skin tone all influenced what images singers determined to be desirable or not. In 2017–2018, most singers used the smartphone app Facetune to take selfies. On Facetune, a singer could make her skin lighter and more dewy, wipe away blemishes, and even change the shape of certain features, making a narrower chin or larger eyes. Filters meant instant improvement to makeup and lighting. Most singers could edit masterfully with a few quick swipes of their fingers.

My own failures to meet the required aesthetics threw those aesthetics into sharp relief. At a concert in Pati, singer Vivi Ayu invited me to take a selfie with her. Perhaps assuming that, as an American, I would have access to a phone with a better selfie camera, she first used my phone to take a picture. I was perfectly happily with the result, but she clucked her tongue, gave me my phone back, and took hers out instead. “Don’t you use any good apps?” she asked me as she opened Facetune to snap some photos. She later posted one of the photos taken with her phone to Instagram.



*Figure 32: Vivi Ayu and the author take selfies in Pati, Central Java, 2018. The image on the left was taken with my phone. On the right, my repost of Vivi Ayu's version of the selfie, taken with the app Facetune.*

At the time I happily posted my own photo. The differences between the images (see Figure 32) are stark to me now that I know what to look for. Both images show us smiling coyly, not showing our teeth. Both show us from the waist up, gazing directly into the camera, raised slightly above us. The setting is the same. Our clothing is the same. However, the lighting and coloring are sharply different. In the first, Vivi and I are awash in blue light. Our faces, partly shadowed, look almost purple, and spots of bright light highlight my shoulder and neck. In her photo, our faces are the same bright, creamy white, our skin smooth and unaffected by the stage lights and free from shadows. At a

dangdut concert, when different-colored lights shine in all directions, this bright neutral lighting takes effort to find and the help of a designated app to manipulate. This aesthetic reflects the beauty standards discussed earlier.

For me, proper social media use for dangdut singers posed a steep learning curve. Singers constantly monitor social media apps on their phones, scrolling through posts from their competition and composing carefully worded comments on the posts of singers who are more famous than they are. Social media is more than a place to promote their own work. It is increasingly more important than what happens on a concert stage. This constant comparison is not just a sacrifice of time; it also influences their mental health.

Social media is also a locale where singers deliberately portray the sacrifices they make for the sake of beauty. Curiously, the obsession with “authentic” whiteness and beauty as desirable standard described by Cain (2008) is completely absent from dangdut koplo, replaced by an ethic of work and sacrifice. Singers make no pretense to authenticity. The phoniness seems to be the point because it reveals their dedication and sacrifice. In recent Instagram videos, superstar Inul Daratista shows her journey to lose ten pounds. No makeup, wrapped from head to toe in an extremely uncomfortable-looking plastic track suit, she gasps for breath after doing cardio on her treadmill. The treadmill, personal trainer, and specialized training system are all symbols of her economic privilege, but they also show her effort and dedication to suffering and persevering in the name of beauty. She untucks the plastic shirt and pulls it up, revealing her belly, and her sweat pours out, streaming down her arms. “What's it like to sweat a full cup of sweat like this?” she asks in the caption. She lifts her right hand to the camera,

thumb and first finger pressed together into a heart, a common symbol K-pop fans and stars use to show their dedication. Beauty is part of the challenge of self-improvement, and by performing the effort that goes into beauty on social media, Inul shows evidence of self-improvement, and thus modernity. As Nguyen writes, this is “connecting passivity to poor self-image” (2011:370) and thus identifying beautiful subjects with modernity, individuality, and global citizenship. Yet, unlike the regimes of beauty as human rights ideology discussed by Nguyen, beauty does not make dangdut singers human in Indonesian ideology, nor does it identify them as “Western.” This beauty regime makes them larger than life, an example of “extreme beauty” (Kang 2021), embracing an aesthetic that the majority of the population does not care to attempt.

#### Diets, Overwhelm, and Mental Health

From my fieldnotes August 13, 2018:

So many women here ask my secrets for being thin. I never know what to say, other than exercise. But they all ask if I’m taking any *obat* [E. medicines/supplements].

One day in mid-September, Nasha Aquila collapsed. The night before, we had stayed out late at two dangdut clubs in central Surabaya. After her husband Paijo and I got her home, her father blamed her weakness on the dietary supplement Herbalife. He told me that she had stopped eating rice. He was convinced the diet supplements could not possibly be enough nutrition. He sent Nasha’s mother to buy *bubur ayam*, a rice and chicken porridge. I sat with her on her bed, supporting her body as Paijo gave her medicine, water, and spoon-fed porridge into her sluggish mouth. After leaving her in bed to rest, Nasha’s husband Paijo told me that her father had once cured her through use of a powerful kris, a ceremonial dagger often said to possess magical properties. Paijo said he



did not necessarily believe in the mystical properties of the kris, but he had tried to stop Nasha from dieting. He told me that all the *artis* were constantly comparing themselves to the others (Figure 33). It's not healthy, he said. And they have so much stress that they get sick really easily.



*Figure 33: The "all artis" section of a performance in Lumajang. Nasha is closest to the camera. Photo by the author.*

While dangdut singers diet constantly, they embrace a curvier silhouette than the standards of the United States of America or South Korea. Curvy hips and thighs in particular are valued, and singers talk about being too thin as well as too fat and seek an “ideal” weight. By the end of my fieldwork, Nasha advised me that I should try to put on more weight before returning to the U.S.; otherwise, my partner would think I had been unhappy in Indonesia. In contrast, Andre, a radio DJ and producer at Radio Muara Jakarta, once compared dangdut singers to K-pop singers, noting how in K-pop singers

aren't permitted to reach a weight above fifty-four kilograms (one hundred and nineteen pounds). "And they're tall!" he exclaimed. "Even you," he said, and reached out to squeeze my muscular, short thigh, "would have to slim down."

My own appearance was a matter of constant debate when I was with singers—whether my thighs were too thick, whether my freckles came from eating pork, whether my ankle boots made me look like an *organ tunggal* singer (i.e., cheap). I imagine their criticism towards me stemmed from their own internal monologues, in which they were constantly comparing themselves to others, as Paijo said. The ideal idol, the perfect goddess, was in their minds, shaping their perception of themselves. Similarly, constant comments about appearance seemed to be part of the job.

On one occasion, a group of about eight singers and patrons were eating together after a morning concert in south Surabaya. As we waited for food to arrive, one singer looked at me from across the table and smiled.

"Where did you get your nose?" she asked. "Did you go to South Korea?"

I nearly choked on my sweet tea. While questions about plastic surgery came up more than I expected, usually singers waited until we had developed a closer relationship. I shook my head. "I've never had plastic surgery."

"Oh! So it's real?" She laughed. "Well, you could fix that bump at least. I've had plastic surgery here, here, here, and here (she indicated her nose, eyelids, chin, and lips). And these (she shook her breasts from side to side)!"

In general, dangdut singers see plastic surgery as something to be proud of and necessary maintenance. As discussed above, many point to encouragement from Islam

for wives to look beautiful for their husbands. In their view, beauty is something women ought to work to maintain, and, if they can afford plastic surgery, all the better. Plastic surgery is thus considered to be almost a duty, a normal part of beauty maintenance. Of course, this maintenance is available to a limited few because of the cost. That works to singers' advantage, however, as their beauty also demonstrates economic success. They post before and after selfies, videos showing the process, and sometimes even get sponsored by clinics.

Many singers find all this pressure exhausting. Once afternoon Nasha Aquila and I were leaving the television station *Stasiun Dangdut*. As we slipped out of the Graha Pena building and into Nasha's car in the parking lot, she immediately climbed into the back of the car, peeling the straps of her high heels from her feet.

"I hope you don't mind, Andrea. It's just that, as a singer, we have to dress like this all the time. As soon as we get the chance, we want to take it all off."

She removed her puffy red and white dress and beat it down into a duffel bag before slipping a simple checkered blue and white shift dress over her head. She removed her eye color changing contact lenses and false eyelashes, then rubbed off her makeup with a wipe. Her hair she pulled back into a loose ponytail. She emerged from the backseat with a sigh of relief, throwing her flipflops onto the ground so she could slide into them as she walked to the front seat.

"Now," she said, "I am myself again."

### *Providing*

As described above, singers often provide for their whole extended family, folding them into their career. While singers take great pride in being able to provide, they also face pressure to continue expanding that support, which means constant work. Many families lived in constant fear of the singer somehow losing her career, which provided for all of them. Sodiq, guitarist and vocalist of OM Monata at the time, told me one day when a singer cancelled because of illness, “When a singer is sick, her husband gets angry, because artis bring in the dough.” I saw this clearly in the relationship between Nasha Aquila and Paijo, her wise and patient husband, whose income as a kendang player was only supplemental to hers as an artis. As I describe above, Nasha Aquila often fell sick from stress and exhaustion. On September 13, after one of her spells of illness, she said to me:

Artis have to be strong. If they get sick, only their husband can know. If they [her parents, who live in the same household] know I’m sick, they worry and don’t let me work, even though it’s me that makes the money. If I have to stay at the hospital, my husband stays with me and we tell them we’re out of the city.

The pressure to constantly provide more also means that, although singers cultivate strong family and community bonds, they do not get to spend as much time with family and friends as they wish. A life on the touring road is taxing and time-consuming, and success only brings more responsibilities. Ratna Antika is one of East Java’s most successful singers, with stage presence that lights up any space. She has never been able to truly crack Jakarta life, and instead makes money by touring and investing in her husband’s tobacco farm. She has two children, five and six years old in 2017–2018. She told me that her life was on the road, and she only rarely gets to see her young children.

This is the sacrifice she makes to support them, knowing that her career is limited. I will explore the stress and danger of touring further in Chapter 3.

*Precarious Travel, Exploitative Production*

Singers of dangdut koplo face threats from within the industry. These take two main forms: sexual harassment and assault from men who are producers, DJs, patrons, managers, or musicians; and being cheated and locked into unfair or dishonest work relationships. In these respects, dangdut koplo industries mirror what women musicians deal with all over the world. During the 2010s, attention turned to sex and gender discrimination in music industries with world over, as data showed the problem went far beyond misogyny in music videos; women musicians were making less in royalties and held shorter careers, while women held many fewer decision-making positions in the industry (Strong and Raine 2019:2; McCormack 2017). #Metoo impacted the music industry in the United States, as cases surrounding Kesha, Britney Spears, Taylor Swift, and other top performers revealed the extent to which powerful men in the industry felt entitled to women's bodies, voices, and creative output. While statistics for gender do not seem to exist for Indonesian recording and television agencies, anecdotally women appear to hold a larger percentage of decision-making positions than is the norm in the United States. Even so, dangdut koplo singers reported high levels of sexual harassment, abuse, and exploitative contracts, both in off-air touring and from Jakarta studio executives.

Unlike many other industries, dangdut koplo singers often have one-on-one physical interactions with audience members and patrons, both onstage and off. Singers

depend on patrons and fans to maintain their income. At dangdut concerts, that financial relationship is performed onstage, as patrons ascend to dance directly with the singers in a practice called *saweran*, what Bader calls “nyawer encounters” (2012:12). These encounters mainly function to demonstrate the wealth and prestige of the person giving the money, putting singers in a tenuous situation: how can singers, stigmatized as they are, refuse unwanted advances, both on and offstage, from someone who provides them with financial stability? How can they protect themselves when the social situation calls on them to serve as a conduit for the power of others?

The atmosphere at dangdut koplo shows can be outright aggressive. Fortunately, the average audience member has little direct contact with singers. They still pose risks, however, with the most frightening being *tawuran*, fistfights that grow and seem to engulf the entire crowd. In the following interview excerpt, Nasha Aquila and Paijo discuss the root causes of violence in off-air dangdut koplo events. Their discussion also reveals some of the stigma singers hold against certain ethnic groups and social classes. In particular, though they do not state as much explicitly here, their words reflect biases against the ethnic Madurese, who make up a large percentage of dangdut fans in East Java, and who the Javanese view as overly emotional, loud, and violent.

Andrea: What has your experience been like so far? What’s the good and the bad?

Nasha: When I sing, lots of the audience likes to dance together. But some also throw things.

Andrea: Throw what?

Nasha: Rocks! If they don’t like something, maybe they don’t like the song, they throw things. It happens all the time. It’s even worse if I’m singing in an area that’s primitive [I. *primitif*], singing in areas like that is extremely uncomfortable. Besides the narrow, dangerous roads, one car can hardly get through. There, no matter what I wear, as we’re shuffled to the stage, they like with little sticks.

Onstage it's a clamor. That's how it always is. And then we see them start to fight [I. *tawuran*].

Andrea: In your opinion, why does the audience get angry just from watching the show?

Nasha: There might be a lot of reasons.

Paijo: I think it's usually between two things. First, they're under the influence of alcohol.

Nasha: They drink hard liquor.

Paijo: The second, maybe they don't have much discernment [I. *wawasan*].

Nasha: It's like this. Most of the audience are from the interior [I. *pedalaman*]. Do you know what that means? They're local people [I. *orang daerah*].

Paijo: They're not from the city.

Nasha: So their attitude is lacking, they lack courteousness [I. *sopan santun*]. They don't have any education, those that watch. So, I sing. If I sing a song they don't like, they get angry. Just like that. But they also fight among themselves, and that's because of the influence of alcohol.

Paijo: There's nothing like *tawuran*.

Nasha: In other countries, is there anything like *tawuran*? I've never seen it in the news.

Andrea: There are fights, but for the most part, if people drink and go to concerts, it's to enjoy it, not to fight. They want to—

Paijo: Fly, relax (he here uses the English word “fly”).

Nasha: Here, drink just a little bit, and you're already wasted. It'll kill you. Seriously, one bottle alone will kill you. It happens a lot.

Paijo: It's true, one bottle, and it's one hundred percent alcohol.

Nasha: One hundred percent, so you drink a little bit, and you're drunk.

Andrea: It surprises me, because usually Indonesians seem to value politeness and don't want to be seen as too emotional, right?

Paijo: Yeah, yeah.

Andrea: Why do they drink?

Nasha: They want...they want to be happy [I. *hapi*]. They want to have a good time. But it's only those people from the interior—

Paijo: I really think it's like this—

Nasha: Those that don't have other entertainment.

Paijo: Yeah, drinking a little bit now and then is normal. But for these people, their thinking from the beginning is already emotional. People will put on events, and if someone doesn't like the host, or they don't respect them...yeah. That's the case in areas, like where Monata plays a lot, way out there.

Nasha: When we perform in Lumajang, there will be a big audience. For sure there will be *tawuran*.

Nasha's prediction was correct. *Tawuran* broke out without warning, again and again, at that concert in Lumajang. When it happened, the singer would quietly leave the stage.

The band would stop playing, and the MC would come out and yell into the microphone, directing security to the instigators and throwing water bottles to try and cool the audience down. From the stage, *tawuran* is at first hard to see in the blur of bodies in the dark, but the fight kicks up dust, creating a highlight that reflects back the stage lights (see Figure 34) as other audience members get swept into the black whole, fists flying or running to catch the instigators.



*Figure 34: Nasha performing in Lumajang. Photo by the author.*

In the last few years, a movement has started among fan groups to counter *tawuran*. Called *goyang damai* (peaceful dancing) or *pasukan* (squad), groups will arrange themselves in formation, carefully spaced apart to avoid touching others, and perform the same dance moves, spontaneously following the lead of the head dancer, who improvises the moves in the moment. Fans see this movement as setting a positive



example for audience members, and women fans especially appreciate that it allows them to participate in a deliberately spaced, active way. However, many expressed doubt that *goyang damai* could stamp out *tawuran* completely. For all its virtues, *goyang damai* cannot create the frenzy-like state of flying sought by many men in dangdut audiences.

I never myself witnessed the kind of violence Nasha described, in which singers themselves became targets of violence from the audience. I ascribe two possibilities for this difference of experience. The first possibility is a misunderstanding between Nasha and myself. Nasha used the word *biasa* to indicate how common this problem was. She used the same word to describe the frequency of unwanted touching onstage (see the following section about harassment). Although *biasa* is usually used to describe frequency of occurrence, singers also use this word to indicate they've gotten used to an aspect of their career. Perhaps she is using this word to show how she has become accustomed to abusive behavior rather than to describe how frequently it happens. Second, most of the women singers and bands I followed for this research had already reached regional fame. That likely means heavier policing at concerts and better behaved audience members than may be the norm at rural concerts with performers of less renown. As a general rule, the more famous a singer, the more protections are put in place for her; perhaps less famous singers and bands face rowdier audiences.

### *Industry Deceit and Abuse*

In addition to the dangers of the road, singers fall prey to the same music industry pitfalls that plague music industries all over the world. These abuses range from taking advantage of young, ambitious singers with exploitative contracts to outright sexual

assault. Singers who go to Jakarta to try to make a name as recording artists are especially vulnerable. Both Nasha Aquila and Lenny outlined to me their experience with Jakarta record labels.

After Lenny was offered a record deal, she worked to fund the production of that record herself.

Lenny: The recording process took a year. I didn't perform at all. This was before JTV. I was waiting for the money to record, because I had to pay for everything myself. If I wanted to make an album, I had to pay for it all, starting with paying the songwriter for the songs. Back then, the price was Rp50.000.000. That was for ten songs. That doesn't even begin to include the cost for launching events, for distribution. At this point, I'd gotten the 50 juta, I'd gotten the master recording, and I'd sent the studio the cassette. After that, I went back to Surabaya and waited. I had nothing for most of 2003. I was singing for small office events in Surabaya.<sup>18</sup> If there was an event, like a change in leadership, I would perform at the office building. Eventually I got to know the family of a man in the National Land Agency (BPN). I was singing at the attorney's office, you know, for those high level ministries, and someone there was a fan of mine. This fan, he said, "Let's do it! It's not a big deal. I'll pay for you to be able to distribute the album." He paid for distribution and marketing, and the album finally came out in 2003. In 2002 I recorded it, in 2003 it finally launched. I spent one year looking for funding. And I'd already spent so much in Jakarta, you know how Jakarta is. I lived there too, and I only got whatever singing work I could. The year after that was a vacuum. I'm not talking about cleaning the house. The master tape had been cut, but how could I get it into people's homes? I couldn't do it without Pak—. He promised to pay, but in the contract, it said he would take all the money from album sales. I could only launch it. I have an album, but all the proceeds went to him. At the time, I thought what was important was the album. Getting the album out. After the launching, that's when I started working for *Stasiun Dangdut*.

Lenny left full-time singing behind to work as a presenter and host for the television show *Stasiun Dangdut*, the main dangdut television show from East Java. In Chapter 5, I

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<sup>18</sup> Government agencies and private companies in Indonesia commonly share the idea that employees singing together boosts moral. They often hire *organ tunggal* singers—or sometimes full bands—to lead the festivities.

describe her experience as an MC. This career alternative has worked out well for her, though she still records music as often as she can, now using her contacts in television and sharing her recordings through YouTube and Instagram.

I asked Lenny to clarify how the processes she described for marketing, circulation [I. *titip edar*], and launching usually worked. She explained the following:

Lenny: When you're making an album, first you buy or get songs. Once you have songs, you hire musicians and create a master. Once you have a master, *titip edar* and launching is the next step. For *titip edar*, you pay again, Rp60.000.000 for the label to promote the album. They write down in their records that you've paid a certain amount, and then that's it—they spread your album all over Indonesia. The thing is, Andrea, back then...you have to understand, we were *orang desa*. What I mean is, we were lied to. We were tricked. We didn't have any experience. We should have asked for reports, evidence for where our video had already been broadcast, to what TV stations and where. There should have been some kind of report. They would say, "Oh yeah, you'll be on TVRI eight times later." But it wasn't true. They lied.

According to record producer David Karto, *titip edar* is a type of contract common for record labels in Indonesia. Under a *titip edar* contract, musicians produce albums on their own and then sign the album over to the record label for distribution and divide the profits (Wiraspati 2013). While this type of recording contract seems inherently to favor artists who possess their own wealth, and to be an exploitative model for everyone else, Lenny's situation was complicated by the contract she developed with her patron. It's unclear whether the patron ever paid the money for distribution, or perhaps whether the record label simply mishandled the funds. Regardless, after sinking more than Rp50.000.000 of her own money into the album (Rp.135.000.000 today, about ten thousand U.S. dollars), Lenny was left with no income whatsoever. Other East and Central Javanese singers have a similar attitude towards Jakarta music studios. Nasha

Aquila briefly signed with the dangdut label Nagaswara, but quickly terminated the contract for two reasons. First, she reported that they would not let her be open about being married. She would have to pretend to be single. Second, they provided no support for music and video production, only for distribution. Nasha saw that as a raw deal.

It's understandable that Lenny would focus on the role of luck in a singer's career, and that she would have a negative perspective of the dangdut recording industry in general. She reflected, somewhat bitterly, on what aspiring dangdut singers are subjected to in Jakarta.

Lenny: In my opinion, if someone wants to make an album in Jakarta or wants to become a singer, there are three types. The first type is wealthy on their own. A singer who is already very popular, for example, or someone truly rich, the child of wealthy parents who pay for it. They don't have to think about the cost of promotion, so they're seriously rich. The second type is the shortcut. Do you know what I mean by that? It's like this. For example, I want to be a singer. I have a good voice, but I don't have any money. How can I get where I want to go? I take the shortcut. I play with the producer, is the essence of it. Like a mistress [I. *istri simpanan*], to be bedded. Indecent [I. *nakal*]. So, the first type is independently wealthy; the second is indecent, promiscuous, they sleep with the boss. The third type is lucky. That's it, just three factors, if you want to...I suppose it can happen that you have all three, a singer that's at the top might be rich, play dirty, and be lucky. They'll get there. But for me, I didn't have money. I didn't want to sell myself. I had a little bit of money, but what I had wasn't enough to go. Of course, I was lied to, of course the mafia in Jakarta chewed me up and spit me out. But suddenly, after I was tricked, I started at JTV. It turned out I had some luck after all. While I was lied to and tricked, all my money up to fifty *juta* disappeared, I only got to perform a few times, my music only aired a few times, but my luck came back. When I felt like that, completely abandoned, that's when I got the fortune to land a job at JTV. Because of that, I say, you should enjoy life as much as you can no matter what happens. If you get lied to, you'll surely have luck. If they steal from you, you'll get that back, Andrea.

As I will describe in Chapter 3, most East and Central Javanese singers with established touring careers give up on Jakarta, seeing it as a means to get more publicity but careful to expect nothing more. For them, their success is in their own hands, and

trusting producers and record labels is folly. In an era in which social media is the preferred way of listening to music, singers can control and promote their own content. As long as they are content to never have the broader distribution offered by studios, singers have learned to get by without them. Singers thus sacrifice the potential for greater fame and income in return for the pleasure of complete control over their career and image.

### *Stigma and Harassment*

As mentioned in earlier chapters, Lenny is not alone in believing that many singers use sex to solidify their careers. Perhaps because this belief is so widespread, I have saved it for late in the chapter in an attempt to avoid artificially reifying this belief by putting it front and center. This belief remains pervasive, though the younger generation of dangdut koplo singers have begun to push back, as shown by Via Vallen's example at the start of the chapter. For the upper middle class, dangdut singers are often seen as little better than sex workers. Singers suffer under this stigma, and many see it as a sacrifice they take on in return for providing a good living for their families. At the same time, many singers resent the stigma, seeing it as caused by individual singers who lack morals.

Yuli: In 2010, dangdut singers became a joke<sup>19</sup> and the number of jobs decreased because so many new singers appeared. And they weren't respected. Get it? There are three reasons why a woman becomes a dangdut singer. The first is that she

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<sup>19</sup> Although Yuli did not explain why dangdut singers had become a joke directly, I contextually interpret her meaning as that, since the rise of Inulmania, more young women attempted dangdut careers as a way to make fast money. Simultaneously, dangdut koplo of that period was thought to be all about dance. Singers were expected to have their own signature *goyang*, a dance move designed to get attention. Yuli may be referring to what many Indonesians saw as superficiality, kitsch, and devaluing of musicality during this period.

genuinely loves to sing. The second reason is because of her economic condition. Now, singers with this motivation began to enter the industry and disturbed the degree to which singers were respected. They didn't—some men, because they give money, they think they can buy us. They can't tell apart, which is the true singer [Yuli uses the English words “the true singer”]<sup>20</sup> and which aren't. This made me angry back then. Often, we'll be singing, and they'll send someone to ask whether we're okay with going home the next morning instead of that night. As a singer, that is a huge mental weight. The heaviest mental weight is when we meet people like that. First, we're professionals. We're working. We have to entertain them. Second, we're not comfortable with people who have that belief about us. But I had a principle at that time. When I'm on the stage [she says “I'm on the stage” in English], I belong to the audience. If, for example, there's tension or touching while I'm singing, no problem. But, behind the scenes [Yuli says “But, behind the scenes” in English], I am myself. If they want to do things like that, the situation has changed, and we have changed. We don't want that. To hold on during that time, I had to focus on the money I was getting from dangdut. I could go to university. It's because of dangdut that I could raise her [she indicates her daughter Alice]. I can get to this level. That's it: [switches to English] I get money from dangdut, I keep in a bank. I use money from dangdut to make business. I use dangdut money to my education. [Switching to Indonesian] Since 2010 I've been very troubled, because some people cannot tell the difference, which is the true dangdut singer and which is false. Even up to now, there are many singers, and with YouTube, they can learn dangdut easily. I want to convey that dangdut singers these days do not have soul in their singing. It's only [English] how to make money. How to make money with dangdut.

Yuli sees the stigma against singers as arising from an increase of singers who perform because of economic need rather than out of love for the music. This opinion is surprising, given the way most singers (including Yuli herself) frame their early forays into singing as due to economic need. Yet Yuli identifies her discomfort with audience stigma and stereotype, and the way she deliberately negotiated her onstage and offstage character and behavior. Singers carry this “mental weight” of stereotyping wherever they

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<sup>20</sup> In Chapter 5, I will discuss Yuli's career in more depth. She used the money she earned as a singer to go to university and start several businesses, including one in Bali. As a result, she speaks very good English and frequently switched back and forth in her conversations with me. I interpret her switching as deliberately signaling nodes of connection with global circuits of value and meaning, showing her status, education, and cosmopolitanism.

perform, and it increasingly impacts their social media accounts as well, as in the case of Via Vallen mentioned in the introduction to this chapter.

The stigma against singers is reflected in their treatment from fans both onstage and off. While many fans were the picture of politeness, others made assumptions about their sexual availability and treated them accordingly. Traveling with them, I was often treated in the same way and sometimes worse, as they took advantage of my ignorance of social norms. I wrote in my fieldnotes on August 8, 2018:

As usual, I get asked for almost as many selfies as the artists themselves. Some young men ask me to take the selfie, then pose looking down at my breasts. When I ask them, “kok serius?” [E. how can you do what you’re doing right now?], they don’t know how to respond, as if they’re shocked I would dare to call them out. Of course they only want to look cool in front of their friends.

Nasha Aquila once taught me how to handle unwanted touching from fans offstage. She told me, “You slap his hand gently and tell him, ‘Bukan mahram.’ That will embarrass him, and he won’t have an answer for it.” The phrase *bukan mahram* indicates that, because I am not a relative of the man, it is inappropriate under Islamic law for him to touch me in any way. Although most Javanese did not follow these rules for touching during my fieldwork, and the phrase seems implausible when used by a dangdut singer who takes money directly from men onstage, Nasha here shows how women leverage Islamic language to protect both their bodies and reputations.

Sometimes the unwanted touching happens onstage during the act of *saweran*, in which men tip singers as they perform, handing them bills. When I asked Nasha Aquila about onstage harassment, she responded with a hint of exasperation and explained some physical and vocal techniques she often used to counter this behavior onstage.

It happens a lot. For example, if I'm onstage and receiving *saweran*, certainly there will be some rascal, so I make sure the money goes straight to my forehead. Sometimes a *penyawer* comes from behind and tries to hug me close. But I'm always aware and ready to say 'don't,' but politely, so they're not offended or angry. This is already so normal for singers, and we refuse it, but always politely. We admonish them directly, but with words that are *halus*, with a little smile, and say, "Sorry, please don't grab me." Like that. (personal comments, September 2020)

The movement Nasha describes, of bringing the money to her forehead, is a movement of great respect for the other person. She refuses their advances, hands that might travel to other parts of her body, by forcing them to allow her to show the respect for them that she might show to a parent or boss. This strategy of refusal is overtly respectful but communicates the message clearly to the offending party.

Singers speak, dress, and travel strategically to avoid unwanted stereotyping and harassment. Overall, current dangdut industry practice supports a corrupt, patronage-based patriarchy more than it challenges it. However, many individual singers, managers, and other women are able to break free. In the next section, I summarize how singers balance different stereotypes and role requirements to become the ideal dangdut koplo idol, wife and mother, or pious Muslim, depending on the situation.

### **Conclusions: Performing Dangdut Koplo, Performing Identities**

In the choreography of their daily lives and performances, singers synthesize steps and postures with roots in different cultures, times, and places. As shown in the previous chapter, their off-air practice is rooted in the traditions of women who sing and dance before audiences of men as part of harvest and life-cycle rituals. Singers thus preserve those steps, accepting money from men the way rain falls on rice fields. Singers also perform through mass media and must fulfill the archetype of pop music idol, complete



with glamorous makeup, clothing, and lifestyles. As Muslims in a Muslim-majority nation which recently suffered a moral panic, due at least in part to the lessening of censorship after the New Order and resulting Inulmania, singers cannot cross certain religious lines publicly and must be able to justify their work in the face of religious arguments. Finally, they face the judgement of the upper echelons of society, who embrace either a westernized brand of secular modernity or a New Order-influenced brand of paternal governance and State-Ibuisim. While every singer deals with these archetypes unevenly and in different ways, most are influenced partly by all of them. Their everyday lives combine these identities, but they also self-consciously publish and perform them, onstage and increasingly through social media.

#### Countering Stereotypes, Performing *Ikhlas*

No matter how hard she tries, the ronggeng identity she now rejects is the one that supersedes all others in the minds of other people. She grows increasingly alienated and isolated. In many respects Srintil is not seen as a human being, but as a magical charm that has progressively existed for the veneration of an ancestor, the pleasure of men, the promotion of ideology and now the secular accumulation of wealth and power (Cooper 2004:539)

In the above passage, Cooper refers to Srintil, the tragic heroine of the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*. It holds resonance for dangdut singers, who might be seen variously as echoes of a past, *masih bodoh* (still ignorant) way of living, sinful objects of desire, dangerous political influencers, and representations of greed. These stereotypes frame dangdut singers as *kasar*, or coarse: full of hot erotic passion and greed, without moderation. Knowing these stereotypes, singers work to counter them by portraying the Islamic—though fully integrated into Javanese language and culture—principle of *ikhlas*, or sincere renunciation of attachment to worldly goods and outcomes.

One way singers do this is by downplaying the value of their work. With me, singers would joke humbly about their skill as singers and their public persona. They told me, for example, that they were simple *pengamen*, or street buskers, selling songs for petty cash. Both Rere and Nasha referred to their singing as a hobby in the interviews above, albeit a hobby for which they get paid. Others would tell me that their music was only *hiburan* (entertainment), and so not of much significance and not relevant to religious issues. Both these terms belie the clear significance live dangdut koplo performance holds in Javanese society and its significance as a means of income for these individual women. However, by dismissing their own roles as either *ngamen* or *hiburan* (pure entertainment), singers separate their labor in a symbolic role onstage from their personal lives and humble themselves before religious authority.

Almost all dangdut performers are Muslim, but most subscribe to an orientation towards Islam that relates more closely to *abangan* than *santri* as defined by Geertz in 1976. Few pray five times a day, and, in an age of increasing use of the hijab, most still choose not to wear it, even in their private lives. In an age of rising Islamic visibility in Indonesia, dangdut singers must moderate their presentation of self as respectfully religious but not aspiring to religious knowledge. Singers use Islamic tourism, pilgrimage, and celebration to project a pious image on social media. During the holy month of Ramadan, they don head coverings and perform religious-flavored dangdut for gatherings of friends and family breaking the fast. Many embark on *umroh*, a trip to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina outside of the official time for pilgrimage, and advertise their activities heavily on Instagram. By doing so, they project both piety and

cosmopolitanism. In preparation for *umroh* and for some time afterward, they wear the hijab except when performing.

Singers must be cautious when using this type of Islamic imagery. Islamic practice sometimes leaves singers open to accusations of hypocrisy. For example, a post with a head covering often sparks commenters encouraging them to adopt modest dress all the time and expressing disappointment when they fail to. Singers counter these accusations with an interpretation of Islam that values sacrifice, family, community, and empathy over modesty and purity. They also have an excellent trump card, which throws the accusation of hypocrisy back in the accuser's face: "Only God can judge."

Another way that singers counter negative stereotypes is by showing support for their family and community. I use the phrase showing support here to mean both actually supporting the community by providing money, jobs, and events, as well as publicizing this support on social media. When their success is poured back into the community, they avoid judgement and gossip, as Nasha Aquila did when she provided a goat for her neighborhood's celebration of *qurban*. Singers also often form their own economic systems in their communities, with themselves at the center. They provide jobs to their family and community by hiring drivers, makeup artists, tailors, designers, and bodyguards. This reciprocity secures, if not their reputations, at least the protection and loyalty of the community.

Singers of dangdut koplo in East and Central Java fulfill a longstanding role in Javanese society by representing Dewi Sri in harvest and life cycle rituals. The role requires singers to embody both pleasure and sacrifice. Likewise, singers take pleasure in

their work and recognize what they sacrifice in the process. By taking this role, dangdut singers make an argument for their own power and agency.

### **Chapter 3: On the Road: The Hope and Haunting of Mobility**

#### **Journey One: Fan Clubs and Bus Rides**

Roads and the powerful sense of mobility that they promise carry us back and forth between the sweeping narratives of globalisation, and the specific, tangible materialities of particular times and places (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012:459).

The first time I toured with singers along Pantura, I knew little about how touring worked. I only knew I had to experience the infamous North Coast Highway and the raucous dangdut concerts I'd heard about along its borders. I agreed to meet a fan club leader at the Surabaya Purabaya bus station in the middle of the night,<sup>21</sup> and together we took an economy bus along Java's Highway 1 to Rembang, Pati, Central Java. By the time we arrived at the Rembang town square at 2am, I'd begun to understand the material quality of the road underpinning the myth. The bumps. The speed. The chaos.

Highway 1 in the middle of the night seethes with tension, exhilaration, and danger. I thought to myself more than once, my body pressed against the open window of the economy bus, that it must be an act of god that the entire population of Java has not yet perished in a horrible bus crash. The buses hurtle past trucks at breakneck speed. They pass both on the inside—in the other lane of traffic—and on the outside, on the shoulder of what can only be called a two-lane highway. The cars, smaller but less brave, jet past the buses on the long dark stretches.

Nanang, the fan club leader who eventually became a good friend, snored beside me, his thigh precariously touching my own. On his other side, a slim woman chatted on

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<sup>21</sup> Overnight long-distance buses are common in Southeast Asia because the roads are emptier, allowing for faster, uninterrupted driving.

a cellphone about meeting a friend at the mall. The three of us, perched dangerously on a single bus seat, rocked together each time the bus swerved to pass a bothersome truck.

I later learned that most touring singers ride in private vehicles for comfort, ease, and protection. Only the most marginalized singers risk the gendered perilousness of a woman traveling alone by bus or motorcycle. As discussed in Chapter 2, dangdut singers occupy a tenuous position in terms of proper behavior for their gender. Even as singers struggle to raise their socio-economic station, much of the middle class views them as fallen women, and many around them consider them sexually available. Even for me, a young, white woman, a target of interest but also protected by difference, the journey was fraught with tension. I understand why singers choose the car.

But for most Indonesians traveling on Jalan Pantura, the experience is like mine on the bus: moments of gridlock and moments of speed, heat, and sweat, pressed together in the name of the journey. We were all seeking something by leaving home and returning to it. Most of us, I imagine, sought the future in the speed. We sought stable careers and new opportunities. We sought bright, clean, safe spaces. We sought a chance to *make it*.

But the journey itself has the power to eat us up and swallow us whole.

#### Jalan Pantura and Dangdut Koplo

This is Indonesia's Highway 1. Drawn from ancient pathways, constructed into a post road in 1811, today much of it is barely more than a narrow seam across the top of the island of Java. Yet this two-lane road transformed trade and settlement in Java.

Variouly called the Great Post Road, Highway 1, and Jalan Pantura, the road casts a long

shadow over Javanese history. It appears in the writings of Indonesia's luminary thinkers. Most significantly for this dissertation, it shapes the history and practice of dangdut.

*Pantura* is a combination of the Indonesian words *pantai*, meaning beach, and *utara*, meaning north. The north coast highway runs from Anjer in the west to Banyuwangi in the east, almost 1,430 kilometers in length (Figure 35). Careers in dangdut koplo play out on the road: singers and bands traveling from show to show, truck drivers making pit stops in dangdut clubs, men who work on freighters returning to their hometowns and throwing parties. Dangdut blasts from the trucks and buses, and wedding parties at the side of the road join in the cacophony.



Figure 35: Java's North Coast Road (Highway 1). The North Coast Road is in red. Map by Gunawan Kartapranata.

Throughout its many names and evolutions, the road has held numerous associations. First, the road makes promises. The road is modernity. It is speed. It is development. It is new possibilities. It is connection and power. It is change. The road protects and moves wealth. The road enables movement for work. It promises mobility through social class as well as through space.

The road is also danger. It is lined with bodies, victims of three hundred years' worth of violence. It is haunted with spirits, vestiges of that violence as well as memories

of earlier eras. Speed and connection create their own dangers, people meeting who should not meet, governments and militaries and businesses interfering beyond their earlier scope.

For singers, the road promises money—more money than they have ever been able to make before, more even than they could make in the glitzy studios in Jakarta. The road also offers them the thrill of travel in a nation where many women of their social class rarely get to leave their home region, let alone leave it in style and comfort. The road promises fame, a fan club in every city, an Instagram following of hundreds of thousands.

However, the road also takes from singers. It takes their time from their families, recording, and other business efforts. It takes their energy and their health. More than anything else, it convinces them to buy into the promise: more work, more money, more possessions, in an endless cycle.

In this chapter, I explore dangdut koplo along Jalan Pantura through the lens of the singers who travel along the road, moving from concert to concert in an exhausting frenzy. While ethnographies often feature arrival stories, this is instead a story of departures. From my home in Surabaya, I embarked on the road with singers who had only temporary destinations, moving for the sake of their aspiration, but also for the thrill and prestige of movement itself. Lives in East Javanese dangdut are mobile ones. With hope as their wheels and ghosts behind their heels, women singers speed down the road in pursuit of the mobility and modernity it promises. Yet, though the road represents a linear journey, it is for many singers more than a passage between places. It becomes a



site of struggle and success, boredom and thrills, suffering and pleasure. Mobility and modernity are thus often false promises with unintended consequences, sometimes failing to materialize altogether. I relate the promise of Jalan Pantura in the lives of dangdut singers to how other Indonesian writers have viewed the road: a source of hope, looking forward to modernity, and a source of haunting, built on the bodies of slave laborers and creating drastic economic change.

With promised change and modernity comes new kinds of injustice and suffering. The road is transport. It is labor. It is sex work and controversy. The road is the promise of the future and the fear of being left behind.

#### Modernity, Mobility, and Fantasies of Infrastructure

Roads and railways are not just technical objects then but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire. They encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real. (Larkin 2013:333)

In making this argument, I rely upon and contribute to scholarship from the discipline of anthropology, which has turned to infrastructure in the last two decades not just as a metaphor for the impacts of modernity but as physical, material substance through which political ideologies are enacted. Infrastructure is multi-layered and multivalent, serving both ideological and practical functions. As the passage above by Brian Larkin indicates, Larkin argues that infrastructure works on multiple levels simultaneously (2013:335), enacting technical tasks, binding people and things into systems, and serving as an “entextualized form,” a concept, idea, or power relation made material. As Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel point out, “Material infrastructures [...] are dense social, material, aesthetic, and political formations that are

critical both to differentiated experiences of everyday life and to expectations of the future” (2018:3). I follow this understanding of infrastructure in my ethnography of singers on the road. I traveled with them, sleeping and changing clothes in their cars and eating with them at roadside food stalls on the way to concerts, experiencing the material conditions of the road while standing as witness to their belief that the road would bring freedom and success.

In recent years, anthropologists have begun to investigate infrastructure as a site for direct ethnographic engagement, considering both how, as AbdulMaliq Simone puts it, “Infrastructure exerts a force: not simply in the materials and energies it avails but also the way it attracts people, draws them in, coalesces and expends their capacities” (2012), while simultaneously showing how infrastructure reveals the political realm. As Antina Von Schnitzler writes, the political “may also take shape at the registers and in the forms of the infrastructural” (2018:135). Brian Larkin calls this disjuncture (or perhaps this juncture?) between the registers of ideas and the material “unbearable modernity.” He writes that because infrastructure is rooted in Enlightenment ideas about a world that moves with unrestrained circulation of goods, ideas, and people as the engine of progress, infrastructure is difficult to untwine from evolutionary ways of thinking. In fact, he argues, this is part of their appeal, as their presence becomes the defining component of civilization. “This mode of thought is why the provision of infrastructures is so intimately caught up with the sense of shaping modern society and realizing the future” (2013:332).

This perhaps also explains why infrastructure is so often analyzed through the lens of imperial and postcolonial projects. Infrastructure comes to symbolize what Anand

et al. call a promise (2018). Rudolf Mrázek, referencing the Indonesian feminist figure Kartini, describes this experience of infrastructure as an “enthusiasm of the imagination” (2002:166), referring to the feelings of promise that technologies such as infrastructures can stimulate. Larkin writes, “A road’s technical function is to transport vehicles from one place to another, promoting movement and realizing the enlightenment goal of society and economy as a space of unimpeded circulation. But it can also be an excessive fantastic object that generates desire and awe in autonomy of its technical function” (2013:332–333).

Infrastructure only ever fulfills its promise unevenly, however. Breakages, delays, poor design, and disrepair cause subjects of the state to become disenchanted not just with infrastructure but with the idea of the state itself and belief in its mandate, as Christina Schwenkel points out (2015:521). More significantly, because infrastructure reflects relations of power, those disenfranchised by the state are often left out of its promise altogether. Anand et al. explain,

Infrastructure is a terrain of power and contestation: To whom will resources be distributed and from whom will they be withdrawn? What will be public goods and what will be private commodities, and for whom? Which communities will be provisioned with resources for social and physical reproduction and which will not? Which communities will have to fight for the infrastructures necessary for physical and social reproduction? (Anand et al. 2018:2)

While infrastructure projects can often be read through the lens of typical neoliberal privatization, in fact infrastructure projects target unevenly those they determine to be deserving or undeserving.

This breakage is most clearly seen in the renewed interest in the discriminatory infrastructure of colonial and imperial projects. Anand et al. write, “the experience of

infrastructure has long been an affective and embodied distinction between the settlers' town and the town belonging to the colonized people" (Anand et al. 2018:3). The promise of modernity symbolized, created, and implied by infrastructure possesses an implied other: the abject, the left-behind. Julie Soleil Archambault describes the frustration of not being able to participate in movement promised by roads and cars as "thwarted dreams of mobility" (2012) as linear ideas of modernization give way to economic disparity.

In this chapter, I explore how dangdut koplo singers experience the road as material in their everyday lives as well as how the road comes to represent hope for the future, the promise of modernity, speed, and profit, all while remaining haunted by phantoms of colonial and postcolonial trauma. For singers of dangdut koplo, the road carries multivalent meanings: hope and haunting; drudgery, danger, and desire. It is a destination, a path, and a home.

### **The Great Post Road: A Fierce General with an Iron Fist**

The Javanese intentionally mispronounced the rank of maarschalk (field marshal) as 'mas galak' or 'fierce man.' It became their epithet for Herman Willem Daendels, the Dutch East Indies 36<sup>th</sup> governor-general, feared for his cold efficiency. (TEMPO 2015:3)

The road was born in blood. In 1808, to shore up military interests from the British and to quell rebellion in Java, Marshall Herman Willem Daendels connected, widened, and formalized existing paths as a Great Post Road. This road would allow him to speedily send troops to any part of Java (Figure 36). Daendels also put in place a modern, streamlined bureaucracy to govern the road, and this changed Java forever,

effectively diminishing opportunities for rebellion, reducing the power of Indigenous<sup>22</sup> governing structures, and flattening the divisions between the island’s ethnic groups.



Figure 36: Java Great Post Road, spanning from Anjer (Anyer) to Panaroecan (Panarukan). Map by Gunawan Kartapranata, 28 September 2009.

Daendels’s motivations for building the road reveal its roots in colonial military power expansion and the desire to subdue rebellion. On January 28, 1807, while the Napoleonic Wars raged, Herman Willem Daendels was appointed Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies by Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, younger brother of Napoleon Bonaparte. Emperor Napoleon was deeply concerned with the English threat in the archipelago Dutch East Indies. He wrote to his brother, “If you lose your colonies, I will do nothing for Holland if you reduce your land and sea forces. It is necessary to have five thousand men and twenty ships of the line and to forcefully impose your annuities. It’s

<sup>22</sup> I here use the term Indigenous to refer to those living on the islands of Java and Madura during colonial rule of the Dutch East Indies. I considered using other terms. “Indonesian,” of course, is anachronistic in this context. While I am often referring to Javanese people here, other ethnic groups, especially Sundanese and Madurese, might be included in the generalization, and so “Javanese” is also unsatisfactory. “Pribumi,” sometimes used in this context, has some current exclusionary political associations I prefer to avoid. I chose not to use “native” because, though still in common scholarly parlance, it has colonial undertones. I have thus chosen “Indigenous” here, though I recognize that sidesteps current important political issues surrounding ethnic groups like Papuans with claims to indigeneity that predates other ethnic groups in the archipelago.

not you who can save Holland, what are you getting into?”<sup>23</sup> King Louis Bonaparte seemingly had little interest in his elder brother’s aspirations for empire, however, and gave Daendels freedom to form much of his own policy. According to Donald Jacob Mackay, writing in 1860, Daendels himself held sway over the king (Mackay 1861:6), who cared more about asserting independence from his brother than overseeing the colonies.

Daendels was likely motivated to build the Great Post Road by two experiences on his journey, according to Nas and Pratiwo: “On his way to the Indies he was forced to travel over land to Africa because of the English threat at sea, passing through France, where he used the streets constructed there under Napoleon. After his arrival he also travelled through Java, which was a cumbersome and time-consuming activity at the time” (Nas and Pratiwo 2002:709). These two experiences likely convinced him of both the threat of the English navy in the region and the importance of good roads to counter that threat. Thus, although some have assumed Daendels built the road primarily for trade, to hasten the export of sugar and coffee through Java to the port cities of Semarang, Surabaya, and Batavia, his motivations were more likely military in nature.

Soon after arriving, Daendels showed his willingness to make enemies in the pursuit of his aims. He dealt with uprisings in Bantam and Cirebon with so heavy an iron fist he felt the need to hide it from his superiors. Nicolaus Engelhard, the disgruntled ex-governor of Northeast Java, whose position Daendels eliminated, wrote raucously about

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<sup>23</sup> “Vous perdez vos colonies, je ne ferai rien pour la Hollande si vous diminuez vos forces de terre et de mer. Il faut avoir cinque mille hommes et ving vaisseaux de ligne et imposer fortement vos rentes. Ce n'est pas vous qui pouvez sauver la Hollande, de quoi vous mêlez vous?”

Daendels's human rights abuses, though Nas and Pratiwo consider him a less than reliable source.

Perhaps because Daendels hid his methods from his superiors, we have few records of the beginnings of the Road. Partly because of Daendels's habit of hiding his more controversial actions from the King, few to no other records of the building and ordering of the road remain. Th. Stevens (1991) as cited in Nas and Pratiwo calls the origins of the road "one big question" (2002:709). The details seem lost to history, although the public consciousness of the construction of the road is one of human rights abuses. Intangible cultural memory of colonized peoples stands to counter the (lack of) colonial archives about this historical wound. Historical wounds are precarious because "the evidence for them is neither anchored in the historical archives nor firmly rooted in historiography, but in everyday practices of a long unrecorded history of misrecognition and abuse that was perceived as a state of normalcy by the contemporaries of the time (Assmann 2021:28). The rest of this chapter considers the impacts of this historical wound, lashed as it is to modernity's promises. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, to name a wound is to be on the path to recovery (2007).

By all accounts, Daendels had to build the road with limited financial support from colonial powers. To save costs, Daendels outsourced much of the labor to local Javanese rulers, relying on feudal relationships to get the work done and effectively ensuring forced labor.

As with most aspects of the road, little information remains about the lives lost. Most of the surviving written records come from Daendels's detractors. Resentful

Nicolaus Engelhard is one such source. He writes that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Indigenous lives were lost due to poor working conditions and forced labor (Nas and Pratiwo 2002:710). Many of the stories of the road that circulate today derive from Engelhard's narrative, and he is likely a source for much of what Pramoedya writes. Military historian and soldier William Thorn's accounts reflected Engelhard's; he reported in his *Memoir of the Conquest of Java* that twelve thousand Indigenous people had died in the construction of the road, mainly due to the dangers of the forest and jungle. He writes, "it is evident that the labour by which the work was accomplished must have been excessive" (Thorn 1815). As an Englishman, Thorn's opinion of Daendels must also be approached with caution.

Regardless of the accuracy of the claims put forwards by foreigners like Engelhard and Thorn, the cultural memory of Daendels' Great Post Road in Java focuses on the trauma of laborer deaths. Daendels own lack of records, likely deliberate, forces this reading against the grain of the archive to address cultural memory. As Diana Taylor writes, the archive sustains power because powers select, classify, present, and maintain certain objects and narratives for analysis above others (Taylor 2003:19). When the archive shows a deliberate absence, as in this case, it is understandable to follow Ann Stoler in taking the systemic void "as a provocation" (Stoler 2010:16). However, unlike Stoler, I am less interested in tracking down the facts of history than untangling the webs of meaning built into the road itself and narratives about it.

As I will describe in the section about Pramoedya's work on the road, calls to remember—or to forget—are often markers of trauma with unaddressed political



ramifications. Radstone and Schwartz write, “Memory and forgetting are frequently invoked in public life to acknowledge and indict diverse acts of violence, present and past, perpetrated by states, groups, and individuals. The politicization of memory is to a degree driven by the sufferings attendant upon the making of the modern, globalized world [...] memory is active, forging its pasts to serve present interests” (Radstone and Schwartz 2010:3). In this chapter, cultural memory and haunting come into conflict with the promise of movement and modernity promised by the road. As Elizabeth Jelin writes, “the presence of the past can disrupt, penetrate, or invade the present as something that makes no sense,” while other human beings “labor on and with the memories of the past” (Jelin 2003:5). Both types of memory haunt the Great Post Road.

#### Political and Economic Transformation

The Great Post Road changed the world of Java permanently, both practically and symbolically as an expression of deepening colonialism. By connecting and improving a series of disconnected roads, Daendels in effect began to flatten ethnic and regional differences, or at least that was his aim. What had once been a hands-off economic colonialism would, in the next century, become increasingly hands on.

The road itself did not only allow the military to defend more effectively against the British threat; it also enabled Daendels and future Governor-Generals to stop organized Javanese and Sundanese threats more effectively. In fact, this was likely one of Daendels’s deliberate goals, though written records do not reflect it. After construction of the road, Daendels put down rebellions in Bantam and Cirebon with relative ease. The Java War, the last major conflict of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on Javanese soil, started because

Diponorogo wanted to stop the Dutch from building a road through the land where his parents were buried. As an attempt to turn back the clock to a pre-post road era, Carey calls it “an exercise in nostalgia” (Carey 2013:36), doomed to fail because the landscape, political and economic orientation, and even the cosmology of the land had been changed by the rupture of the Great Post Road. In stating Daendels’s impact, Carey is too quick to see inevitability in the results of the road, seeing the march of modernity as evolutionary in nature. However, the road did increase the span of Dutch military control over Java significantly.

The road and Daendels’s accompanying bureaucratic impositions transformed the political world of Java as well. During construction, Daendels passed much of the responsibility for construction onto local regents. By requiring regents to provide labor to build roads and plant coffee without any funds for payment, Daendels folded local authorities into the colonial government structure and in effect made them collaborators in exploitation and forced labor.

While the purpose of the road was primarily military, Daendels emphasized how the road would expand trade for colonizers and Indigenous peoples alike. While some evidence exists that the road sped the transportation of coffee, in fact the road was not effective for transporting goods from the interior of Java, a need not effectively filled until the railway system was built. However, in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as motor vehicles became increasingly common, the road slowly overtook trains as the major transportation artery. The impact was especially strong for the cities traversed by the road. As of 2014, according to Djoko Murjanto, director of the Bina Marga Public Road

Network at the Public Works and Public Housing Ministry from 2009–2014, Highway 1 “carries 70–80 percent of all traffic related to the Indonesian economy” (TEMPO 2015:15). The road remains the major artery for the island.

### *Javanese Attitudes and Impacts*

Mrázek calls the road “a pre-twentieth-century wonder of speed (18 to 20 kilometers per hour in the best places)” for horse-drawn carriages and coaches (Mrázek 2002:5). Yet the road functioned mostly to transport mail and goods. European families could not use it for leisurely travel, as small horses could not handle coaches loaded with passengers and belongings (Mrázek 2002:5). Nor could Indigenous travelers use the road, due to a combination of explicit prohibitions and lack of access to large enough animals and vehicles. Thus, while the impact of the road was eventually far-reaching, its symbolic significance at the time was greater than its actual function for Javanese people, who were largely barred from using the road, the political reality of colonization taking form in the shape of infrastructural inequalities.

Famed painter, Raden Saleh, a European-trained Romanticist, was one of the few Javanese men to leave an individual account of the early Great Post Road. He traveled it extensively and produced a series of paintings of the post stops along the way. One section of the road in particular—the Megamendung, the highest pass of the road, located between Bogor (then called Buitenzorg) and Cianjur in West Java—he could paint from memory, complete with famous coffee-house brothel Ma Mina’s (Figure 37). He also painted a well-known portrait of Hermann Wilhelm Daendels, painted posthumously from a miniature and completed in 1838. Daendels, in a glorious uniform, points to a map

of the Great Post Road. The writing in Dutch reads, “*Rigting van Weg Megamendung 1818* (direction of the road in Megamendung).” Tattered silhouettes of Indigenous laborers in the background, tiny but present, form a stark contrast to Daendels’s giant, imposing, grand frame (Figure 38). Engelhard has claimed that the Megamendung section of road alone claimed the lives of 500 Javanese laborers (Engelhard 1816:147). Raden Saleh’s intent in painting the portrait and in returning to this stretch of road again and again remains a mystery. Does his portrait of Daendels glorify or critique the governor-general?



*Figure 37: "Javanese Mail Station," Raden Saleh, complete 1876. Public Domain.*



Figure 38: "Posthumous Portrait of Herman Willem Daendels (1762–1818). Gouverneur-generaal (1808–10)." Raden Saleh, completed 1838. Public Domain.

Raden Saleh's entrée to the road was unusual. Most Indigenous people had little access to travel along the road itself. Private persons wanting to travel along the road had to give reasons for the journey and pay steep tolls to the colonizers. According to Carey, Errembault van Dudzele, who traveled extensively during the Java War, recorded a rate of 500 Dutch Indies guilders to travel from Semarang to Buitenzorg (Bogor, then the colonial military center). Carey writes of painter Raden Saleh, who managed to avoid the toll by applying to the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences for a sponsorship to travel, "For those without the royal painter's connections, access to the *postweg* was a near

impossibility. Indeed, the road was not accessible to Javanese vehicles. It was only for Dutch carriages equipped with the requisite coachmen and footmen” (Carey 2013:32). This spectacular display of colonial control framed modernity as the purview of the colonizers. Kraus and Vogelsang write, “A carriage flying along the sealed and illuminated post road, surrounded and protected by riders in decorative uniforms and the Javanese cowering on the ground: this is the image that best reflects the society [...] when a colonial officer travelled along this road in an official capacity, it was more than just a journey[. It] was a demonstration of colonial power” (Kraus 2012:69). The road thus became a spectacular infrastructure (Schwenkel 2015), both a tool of colonial power and a symbol of that power.

Nas and Pratiwo argue that the symbolic shifts created by the road were among its most significant impacts. The road divided the physical space of some cities in a way that symbolically shifted power. Nas and Pratiwo point out, “In Pati and Demak, for instance, the road divided the *alun-alun* in the middle and became a new economic domain of shophouses, reducing the cosmic power of the regent’s palace as the centre of the political domain. In Semarang, in addition to the construction of the Postweg, Daendels destroyed the city wall and the Dutch quarter was enlarged to the west along the present Jalan Pemuda” (719). In these and other heavily populated cities, the road displayed the power of the colonizers, expanded their physical space, centralized their economic activity, and separated locals from their historical power centers and government authority.

Similarly, the rural areas of the road formed a kind of spectacular infrastructure, meant to amaze and communicate colonial superiority and dominance as much as to function practically (Schwenkel 2015:520). Carey writes that by building the road, Daendels in effect transformed Java into a new order. First, he flattened the distance between the two kingdoms of the islands, the Sundanese in the West and the Javanese in the Central and East. The road symbolically conjoined the two in a way that defied how the Sundanese and the Javanese thought of themselves. It also symbolically brought the power of the colonizers out of West Java and into the territory of the central Javanese sultanates. This created what Carey calls a “shift in consciousness.” The road, Carey writes, had the dual impact of “shrinking of physical distances” while bringing into stark relief “the yawning social gap” between colonial powers and local peoples (2013:35). Nas and Pratiwo argue that the spatial adaptation had an impact on cosmology. No longer were rivers the main artery determining the development of towns or the location of palaces and temples. East-west orientation became more important than the previous north-south orientation, with centers of kingdoms inland near the mountains and vassals on the coast. They credit the road with hastening the end of feudal traditions and planting a widespread Indigenous orientation towards trade (2002:722). The road both creates and symbolizes modernity, but its modernity is deliberately limited to serving Dutch colonial interests.

Roads thus planted the seed of a promise even while demonstrating the colonized state. As Harvey and Dalakoglou argue, roads “elicit powerful temporal imaginaries, holding out the promise (or threat) of future connectivity, while also articulating the

political and material histories that often render these otherwise mundane spaces so controversial” (2012:460). The Great Post Road indeed created an imaginary that has power up to the present. Javanese literary giants write of it in starkly different terms, some celebrating promised connectivities and speed, some seeing ghosts rather than asphalt.

### **Journey Two: Guest Stars and Accidents**

After my first experience traveling with Nanang on the bus, my situation changed dramatically. Videos from my first concerts with the dangdut band OM Monata had begun to go viral. Showing me in rumpled travel clothes, looking terrified in front of thousands with a shaky voice, the videos did not show me in what I considered the best light. Nonetheless, those early concerts spawned a series of newspaper articles. My Instagram account suddenly boasted a few thousand new followers. And the requests started to pour in. I had become a guest star, a *bintang tamu*. All singers want to reach the level of *bintang tamu*; requested directly by patrons, they have greater control over performance order and song choice, flexibility of travel and arrival times, and higher wages. Bunda Mintul, whom singers respectfully called Bunda Monata to emphasize her leadership role for the band OM Monata, texted me and asked whether I would be willing to tour in Pati again. Nervously, knowing it was a great research opportunity but with more than a little ambivalence about my new role, I agreed.

I woke at 2am on Wednesday, August 30, 2018 to a text message from Monata band manager Pak Gatot. “We’re already here!” he texted. The band management had offered to pick me up in Surabaya. I groaned, rolled off my bed, grabbed my packed bag



and a stuffed fox I'd named Foxy Loxy, which would serve as a pillow, called a smartphone application taxi, and, still in my pajamas, made my way to Gubeng train station.

Pak Gatot was there with the band, eating and smoking at a small warung restaurant on the side of the road. I was immediately shuttled into a waiting car where Bunda Mintul, Gatot's wife and partner, greeted me while singers Rere Amora and Vivi Ayu napped in the back seat. The driver put my bag in the back of the car and I quickly dozed off, Foxy Loxy pressed against the window. We soon departed the station in a fleet of cars, travelling west along Highway One. The central Javanese city of Pati was our destination.

At around eight in the morning, our car slowed to a stop. I groggily blinked my eyes open to see a car accident in front of me. One of the cars in our group had run off the road and into a tree (Figure 39). The driver and Pak Gatot were mildly injured. We waited in the car until Pak Gatot and the driver were released from the hospital. The musicians in the band, all men, piled out of the car to wait at a coffee stall by the side of the road. The singers and I, still in pajamas, traipsed into an Indomaret, a ubiquitous corner store, and bought snacks. An hour or two later, we picked up Pak Gatot and the driver from the hospital and continued down the road for another hour. Around noon, we reached a motel owned by Pak Gatot and settled in for a few hours of sleep before the concert later that night.



*Figure 39: The aftermath of the car accident, drivers using a Monata truck to help pick up the pieces. Photo by the author, taken from the front seat of another car.*

At around 3:00pm, Rere woke and went to the bathroom to shower. A young but very popular singer, Rere had an exclusive contract with Monata, common for talented singers starting their careers. Like me, she lived near Surabaya and had been picked up by band management. The water in the bathroom poured from a faucet in the wall into a large bucket. With a smaller bucket, Rere poured water over her body, allowing it to flow into a drain in the floor. Insects crawled up the wall in a steady stream.

Now clean, Rere sat to let her hair dry as she put on makeup. She turned on the television and switched it to a Bollywood film from the early 2000s, humming along to tunes she clearly knew well. Foundation, highlights, eyeliners, false eyelashes, the entire

process took an impressively short amount of time. I skipped the shower and put on my own, much more limited makeup, enjoying the convoluted plot of the Bollywood movie. As she got ready, Vivi Ayu tried to bathe as well, but the water had been shut off. We tried to jimmy the faucet and called management, but to no avail. We'd have to get ready without water.



*Figure 40: Vivi Ayu irons her performance dress with her hair straightening iron. Photo by the author.*

Sighing, Rere pulled a straightening iron out of her suitcase and plugged it into the single socket in the wall, unplugging the television set to do so. She and Vivi went to work on each other's hair while I began to put on makeup. They each took several

dresses out of their suitcases, a stuffed wonderland of blue satin and rhinestones and feathers. After selecting dresses, they began to iron them using the hair straightener (Figure 40). I hesitatingly pulled out the skirt I'd found at H&M in Surabaya. They looked at me pityingly for my lack of taste.

“Andrea, are you going to wear those shoes with that skirt?”

“Yes, I mean, that's all I brought,” I stammered. “What's wrong with them?”

Rere sighed. “First, you can't wear dark shoes with a light skirt. Second, the skirt is too transparent.” She eyed my legs through the skirt with an expert eye. “Don't you have Spanx?”

I didn't have anything I needed in my small suitcase. They shrugged, knowing I had learned my lesson.

The concert ended around midnight. Afterward, Rere and I piled into the same car, already loaded with suitcases. Off came our high-heeled shoes, our dresses, and our makeup. We changed in the backseat of the car. Rere expertly guarded her modesty, pulling the full skirts of her blue satin dress up around her shoulders and slipping her pajama top on underneath. We all pulled on pajamas, cutesy button-ups in pastel colors with cartoon figures like Doraemon printed all over. We stopped at a gas station and washed our faces. We found a *warung lesehan* street stall that still had food, and together we hungrily attacked rice, fragrant, spicy sambal, and fried chicken. Bunda Monata paid, and we chatted as we sipped sweet tea, the night slipping away.

These were my favorite moments with singers, when the tensions of getting ready and performing relaxed into contentedness and unguardedness. Rere told me: “You know

what your problem is, Andrea? You don't open your mouth when you sing. You need to open your mouth more." I laughed, thinking that my singing technique had far worse problems. We took selfies together and Rere showed me how to properly hashtag them (Figure 41).



*Figure 41: A selfie Rere took with me after the concert, when we'd changed back into pajamas and were eating at a warung. Used with Rere's permission.*

Finally, around 2am, we were on the road again, heading back to Surabaya, a distance of 234 kilometers along Jalan Raya Pantura, at a breakneck pace.

For Rere and Vivi, journeys on the road were banal and frustrating. They were tired, frustrated by the lack of a good place to shower, annoyed that we had to share a

single electric socket to charge our phones, heat a hair straightener, and watch television. They were experienced and had worked out systems to maximize comfort and ease, from mastering the way to dress to the best positions for sleeping and the hierarchy of which singers got the most comfortable seats in the car. But the banality and frustration belie their pleasure in performance as well as the dangers of constant travel.

The road is chaos, and every band manager and singer knows this. The road is the only way to travel, but it is full of obstacles. The most pronounced obstacle is *macet*, or traffic jams. According to Djoko Murjanto at the Public Works and Public Housing Ministry, Highway 1 is unacceptably packed from a transportation perspective. “If an acceptable amount of traffic is 60 percent, on Pantura it is 85 to 90 percent” (TEMPO 2015:15). Highway 1 is little more than a two-lane highway for many stretches, one lane going each way for hundreds of kilometers. Homes, restaurants, and stores press tightly against the road. Buses and trucks, driven by some madness to rush as quickly as possible, tear along the road, passing other vehicles on the shoulder or across the other lane. They drive so close that, if you were foolish enough to reach out to touch the traffic on the other side, your hand would be sliced off from sheer proximity and speed as soon as it reached out the window.

Perhaps because of the danger and exhaustion, but also to demonstrate wealth and prestige, dangdut band managers hire a bevy of drivers to shuttle themselves, musicians, and singers to the concert venue. During busy ritual months, it’s common for a band to have two shows a day a few hundred kilometers apart. Singers often do even more shows, up to five a day, which is a feat of travel logistics. Some singers, like those I traveled

with as just described, contract with a certain orkes Melayu to sing exclusively with them. In return, they might get rides from place to place. However, when singers reach a certain level of success, one of their first purchases is inevitably a car, as it enables them to do countless more shows. In a practice called *ngropel*, or doubling up, singers dart from show to show and collect wages at each one. It's potentially extremely profitable compared to other work options open to singers.

Greater mobility means greater physical danger, and singers who *ngropel* face the added risk of organizing their own transportation (though they gain additional privacy and control). Moving along the road is exhausting business for everyone involved, and the road itself is full of traps. While traffic on the road has increased, the capacity of the road has not, leading to an increase in air pollution, road maintenance costs, and traffic accidents (Prasetyo and Hadi 2013:E-17)

### **Hope and Haunting: The Road in Javanese Literature**

While Javanese accounts of the construction of the road have not survived, the Jalan Pantura looms large in the imaginary of Javanese literature. Two of Java's most famous writers, Raden Ayu Kartini and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, both lived near and wrote about the road though their opinions about it differed starkly. Kartini, a young Javanese aristocrat, writes of the road at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with excitement and anticipation for the future. The road, trains, and travel, as with modernity in general, promised for her and other Javanese women of means new freedom. Pramoedya, writing six years after his release from house arrest and one year before his death, saw histories of oppression enacted along the road. These contrasting understandings of the road

coexist in Indonesian society and are present in the lives of dangdut singers who travel along it. Singers themselves view the road much like Kartini did: a location of and means to personal and economic freedom and growth, promising opportunities not usually available to women. However, Pramoedya's view of the road continues to haunt dangdut practice in other ways: in the exploited labor of the men who flock to concerts; in the dangdut brothels at its edges, servicing truckers and laborers; in the car accidents along the road and the ghosts that cause them, and in the fear that development projects will not serve regular people. Perhaps the history of the road haunts it most when considered in relation to state projects of modernization. As Daendels put down rebellion and forced laborers to work unpaid, so too have subsequent governments, from Japanese colonists through the New Order up to today, disrupting lives, forcing people to move and work, and all with the promise of modernity.

Hope: Movement, Freedom, and Feminism

### *Kartini's road*

A hundred years after the Great Post Road was completed, roads still promised modernity, speed, and freedom to young feminist thinker and Javanese aristocrat Kartini, who wrote often of roads, rails, and travel. Rudolf Mrázek shows how Kartini expressed “enthusiasm of imagination” (2002:166) for trains, clean and hard roads, and the power of light to illuminate what she saw as the darkness of patriarchy in the colonies. In this section, I continue Mrázek's analysis to show how gendered experiences of roads shape attitudes towards infrastructure's promise, both for Kartini and, a century later, for singers of dangdut koplo.



Raden Ajeng (later Ayu) Kartini was born on April 21, 1879, to Javanese *bupati* (regent) Raden Mas Adipati Ario Samingun Sosroningrat. Kartini's father was bupati of Jepara, Central Java, and a Javanese aristocrat. He had received a Western education, and, in a significant break from Javanese tradition, permitted his daughters to attend school. Though she only attended school until the age of twelve, Kartini learned to write and speak Dutch and devoured Dutch literature and newspapers. She began to write herself, voraciously, and began to publish in Dutch and local scientific and women's journals. She also began to correspond with many Dutch feminist activists, most notably Stella Zeehandelaar.

It was these letters, rather than her other more formal works, that turned Kartini into an icon. In them, she writes passionately of her desire to attend university abroad and to establish a school for Javanese women. Unfortunately, her dream of studying to become a teacher was never to come to pass. Although she received Dutch government support, the colonial bureaucracy blocked her proposal with endless red tape. In 1903, her father revealed a marriage proposal for her. A child of a polygynous marriage, to a mother who was not the primary wife, Kartini often wrote of her distaste for polygyny. However, in November 1903, Kartini married the bupati of neighboring Rembang, becoming one of several co-wives, with the condition that she be permitted to continue her education. She describes this marriage to Mrs. Rosa Abendanon as a "bitter road" (Cote 2013:633). In her later letters, she writes with more hope for her future opportunities to improve the welfare of Javanese women in her new position as wife of a regent. Kartini would not see her impact during her lifetime. She died at the age of

twenty-five in 1904, shortly after giving birth to a son. After her death, family friend and Minister for Culture, Religion, and Industry in the East Indies Mr. J.H. Abendanon, whose wife Rosa had been the recipient of many of Kartini's letters, published several of Kartini's letters in Dutch in a collection titled *Door Duisternis tot Licht (Out of Darkness Comes Light)*. As one of the few records of Javanese women's perspectives published abroad at the time, the book fascinated Dutch readers at a period when a new sense of responsibility for colonial subjects was spreading in the public consciousness.<sup>24</sup> The burgeoning Indonesian nationalist movement, with some of whom Kartini was also in contact, caught hold of her words and hopes for a new, modern nation.

Since her death, Kartini has become an influential, if fluid, figure. Various political factions inside Indonesia and out have created a version of her image to argue their own political message. Early Indonesian nationalists promoted Kartini as a reformer and feminist. The New Order government instead took hold of Kartini's acquiescence to marriage to portray her as the archetypal self-sacrificing mother, the model for State-Ibuisism (Chin 2018). This was in keeping with New Order visions of state patriarchy, in which "the 'woman' was no longer defined as a comrade in the revolutionary struggle; under the New Order, she was a submissive wife and devoted mother" with President

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<sup>24</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, the East Indies were deep in an economic depression while the Netherlands had been able to modernize due to the wealth they extracted from the archipelago. The Liberal party had promised that liberal economic policies would result in shared wealth, but journalists like Piet Brooshooft (1845–1921) revealed the extreme suffering and poverty caused by Dutch policies (though many, even reformers, blamed liberalism's failure on the Javanese themselves). In 1901, the new, young Queen Wilhelmina, with input from the Christian Anti-Revolutionary Party, inaugurated what was called the "Ethical Policy," intended to bring prosperity and welfare to Indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, the Ethical Policy resulted in greater military intervention, because providing education and opportunity to the whole colony mandated control of the whole colony. See Vickers 2004; Stuurman 1983; Moon et al. 2007; Bloembergen and Raben 2009.

Suharto as the ultimate family patriarch (Wieringa 2003:72). Today, both aspects of Kartini's legacy are found in public discourse. Every year Indonesians celebrate Hari Kartini, or Kartini's Day, on April 21<sup>st</sup> as a kind of women's or mother's day. In Surabaya, every child dressed in traditional Javanese *kebaya* and *kain*. Kartini cuts a potent figure in the imaginations of Javanese women, albeit one that can easily be construed according to the political wishes of the moment and the organization... much like the road itself.

As an aristocratic unmarried Javanese woman, Kartini's family barred her from most travel. She writes, "the only road which lies open to a Javanese girl, and above all to one of noble birth, is marriage." The road in Kartini's letters is both literal—what road did you take? She asks again and again, as one who rarely got the opportunity to travel and for whom the road represented choice and freedom—and figurative, the road standing in for possible choices in life and the journey of emancipation. In this letter, written on October 7, 1900 to Mrs. Rosa Abendanon, a Dutch woman whose husband later instigated the Ethical Policy, Kartini uses the road as a metaphor for her own options.

I know the path I wish to follow is difficult, full of thorns, thistles, potholes, it is rocky, bumpy, slippery—it has not been surveyed. And even if I should not be so fortunate as to achieve my end goal, if I should succumb halfway, I should die happy because then the way would have been opened and I would have helped carve out the road which leads to freedom and emancipation of the Native woman. It would already be a great pleasure for me if parents of other girls who also want to be independent, would no longer have to say: there is no one amongst us who has done that. Strange—but I definitely do not feel afraid, frightened or apprehensive—I am calm and full of courage—only that silly, foolish heart hurts very, very much. (Cote 2013:149)

The road, for Kartini, represented emancipation and choice. She saw herself as a surveyor, as one who cuts a path where none previously existed. As Mrázek writes, “New roads through Java and in the whole colony, to Kartini, were to be fully made of progress, and, as long as they were made of that hard and clean stuff, nothing could stop the wheels” (Mrázek 2002:8). Kartini repeatedly framed herself as a woman oriented toward modernity. As Cote writes, “a sense of an impending modernity, distant as that might be, permeates all of Kartini’s optimistic early correspondence. Kartini’s ‘modern-ness’ was already evident in the act of letter writing, her mastery of the foreign language in which it was written, in her extravagant utilization of the postal system and no less in the airing of her inner life” (Cote 2013:43). And yet she imagines herself clearing a path for other women like her, Javanese women, her orientation always towards seeking modernity in the service of helping the women around her. The tensions between affiliation with colonial powers and nationalist tendencies are palpable in Kartini’s letters.

By arguing that Kartini views the road with hope and promise, I do not mean that the road is in any way feminized. The road’s construction and uses are clearly marked as masculine, and women, when not prevented by law from moving upon it, avoid it due to social convention and the fear of gendered violence against their bodies in public space. That is likely the very reason Kartini looks upon the road with hope and faith in the modernity it promises because, housebound, she rarely witnessed the violence of the road herself. Vernadette Vicuna Gonzalez argues that road building in the Philippines was an explicitly gendered project. Roads enabled masculinized adventures, explorers, and military movement. “This mobility of disciplined male soldiers was intimately linked to a

military presence that was to contain the landscape and the population, which was imagined by military leaders to be almost like a feminized body with ‘extremities’ that posed unimaginable perils” (Gonzalez 2013:53). Yet, to Indigenous women, the road itself held its own opportunity and peril: hope for a new world, like Kartini envisioned, but also the sex trade and fatal accidents.

In her writing, Kartini recognizes the double-bind in which she was placed; she must prove herself and survey new territory both as a woman among her own people and as a “native” woman among the Dutch. Her own path, the path of a native woman seeking emancipation from patriarchy, is “difficult, full of thorns, thistles, potholes, it is rocky, bumpy, slippery,” a far cry from the smooth, wide, paved road Daendels envisioned. However, Kartini deftly avoids buying into colonial promises wholesale and expresses some ambivalence about the potential power of the road. Kartini recognized that roads and travel are tools in control and oppression. While some of her writing seems to idolize what she sees as modernity in Dutch society, especially the feminist movement, she also resists these foreign powers and their command of the road. In her short story “A Governor General’s Day,” Kartini wrote of the thrill of traveling to Semarang to see the colonial authority and the military parade, taking trams and trains and carriages along a road of sticky, fresh, shining black tar and white-washed walls.

Commands were given, the troop split and arranged themselves in two facing each other separated by about three or four meters on either side of the road, leaving enough room for passers-by. The soldiers then moved a little apart from each other. I watched the movements of these sons of Mars with interest: the gold on their helmets and steel bayonets glittered in the sunlight. I looked and looked ... and my thoughts wandered far away from Semarang to the blue sea of the South African coast, that bloody battlefield, to scenes of bitter wretchedness,

heavy and terrible suffering, to the thousands of unfortunates, victims of England's shameful, all conquering greed...

A hand was placed on my shoulder and at my ear a voice said: 'Why are you standing there as in a trance. Are you perhaps dreaming about the soldiers?'

'Yes!' I said matter-of-factly.

'Ha! We have someone here who is dreaming with eyes wide open and in clear daylight – of soldiers, in fact!' A burst of laughter followed that completely shook me out of my dream.

'And, which one is that hero that made such an impression on my dear sister? That one over there with the mournful face? Just right for you!' my sister teased (Cote 2013:752).

That her sister misunderstands Kartini's trance as romantic in nature, and that Kartini does not bother to correct her or explain her true thoughts, tells us quite a bit about Kartini's nature and her opinion of gender roles. The story also demonstrates Kartini's ambivalence towards the colonial project. While she viewed the Netherlands as a land of modernity and progress, a land in which she could receive a satisfactory education, she demonstrates here her underlying fears and doubts. "Where do you want to take me, cannon thunder?" she asks at the close of the story in response to the military drills along the road—a question that can be read with hopeful anticipation or with dread. While the road itself contains a promise, the cannons both threaten and, curiously, beguile. For many women today, the pulse of the dangdut koplo drum beckons with a similar ambiguity.

#### *Hari Kartini at Stasiun Dangdut*

On Hari Kartini (April 21) 2018, I visited the dangdut television show Stasiun Dangdut for a special program celebrating Kartini. Actually, I was invited as a special

guest. Perhaps they invited me because of the ghosts of the Dutch women to whom Kartini wrote many of her letters. Perhaps it was because of my stated interest in women's issues. Perhaps it was the inevitable spectacle of a white woman on local television. Regardless, I found myself on a soundstage, dressed in a kebaya and jeans, singing Inul Daratista's hit "Kali Merah" with one of the show's MCs.

I sat on the sidelines, notebook and camera in hand, as the live program began. It started with a video celebrating Kartini as the initiator of the feminist movement and promoting women's education. The other singers that day, Andra Kharisma and the group Duo Virgin, sang "Makhluk Tuhan Paling Seksi" [E. "God's Sexiest Creation"] as an opener to a live audience as a photo montage of successful young women, all compared to a modern Kartini, played behind them. These women were scholars, founders of businesses, athletes, and politicians. I overheard one of the MCs, a young woman named Dian,<sup>25</sup> ask the producer, a woman named Gita, why the mood wasn't more serious. The producer laughed and cautioned against making the mood too somber; no one would watch! Dian was clearly bothered by some of the jokes. Next, with a backdrop of quotes by Kartini and her portrait, the same four singers sang the patriotic song [I. *lagu wajib nasional*], "Ibu Kita Kartini," "Our Mother Kartini." Kartini was only a mother for the last few days of her life. She died two days after giving birth to her first child, soon after a marriage that she professed to be glad about even while she hid its polygamous nature from her friends and wrote enthusiastically about her renewed faith and love. New Order women's programs took Kartini's image and transformed it into a motherly ideal.

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<sup>25</sup> Pseudonym used at her request.

In the next segment, the other woman MC, Lenny, asked the singers a series of questions about Kartini. “What one word would you use to describe Kartini?” she asked.

One singer replied, “Pretty!” [I. “*Cantik!*”]

Lenny immediately chided her. “With all Kartini did, you only think she was pretty?”

The singer defended herself, “Back then, there was no photo editing! She was truly beautiful.” Lenny raised an eyebrow.

A pair of dangdut singers who performed together, nicknamed Duo Virgin, answered next. They talked about emancipation for women. Kartini helped to make it so women could earn a wage, they said. Both members of the duo are married with children, unbeknownst to much of their audience. Kartini insists in her letters that women should have the freedom to work, to travel, and to not be forced to marry against their will. When the main character in “A Governor General’s Day” is asked to put on more formal court attire instead of her regular kebaya and kain, she tells her acquaintance that women of the coast only wear that type of clothing to get married unless they are *ronggeng*, traveling singers and dancers of the era (Cote 2013:749). Is the freedom of dangdut singers to fly along jet-black roads the type of freedom and modernity Kartini envisioned from the road?

Kartini viewed the road with hope as a promise for a future of freedom and modernity for women and her people. The road paved the way to economic prosperity. It represented the freedom to choose one’s own way. Yet she also recognized the dangers it posed. Dangdut singers view the road in a similar way. It represents freedom and



economic opportunity. It promises a new kind of life, one in which they call the shots. It promises prosperity for their families and the honor of having been the ones to earn it. Yet the road carries dangers. For Kartini, the road implied colonial oppression. For dangdut singers, it more often poses dangers to their bodies and reputations.

### Haunting

Like Kartini, many dangdut singers view the road with rosy ambivalence, celebrating what it promises while whispering about its dangers. The road is haunted by specters of the shocks of the past: two centuries of forced and exploitative labor, bursts of violence, and radical transformation of the environment, all done for the promise of modernity. As colonial legacies gave way to strongman politics, the road fascinated writers like Pramoedya Ananta Toer, as a symbol of the suffering of the exploited everyman laborer, whose blood and sweat was spilled on the road.

### *Ghosts on the Road*

Paijo, Nasha, and I were stuck in a traffic jam. Paijo is an excellent driver and loves to talk, so he turned to me at every slowdown. This time, he asked earnestly, “Andrea, did you know this part of the road is haunted?”

I smiled gleefully. I love ghost stories. More than the effect of the adrenaline, I love to parse apart what ghost stories communicate. However, my professed skepticism of the reality of ghosts was a consistent sore spot with many of my interlocutors.

“Yes, it’s haunted. Many people have died here in mysterious accidents. They say there’s a phantom bus. It appears out of nowhere at night. People swerve to avoid hitting it, and boom! They hit something else. Many people on motorcycles have died.”

I asked where he thought the ghosts came from. Were the ghosts the specters of people who had died in traffic accidents past causing more? He responded that it was impossible to know. “Sometimes it’s accidents, but maybe there’s something in the place itself. Sometimes places are just haunted.”

*Pramoedya’s Road*

...Thousands of corpses spilled on the road. (Pramoedya Ananta Toer 2005:6)

Today, the memories of the construction of the Great Post Road are colored with violence. Comic books, films, and stories portray Daendels as a genocidal slave driver. Perhaps this narrative is the undocumented truth, passed down through Javanese cultural memory. Perhaps it is part of a deliberate revisionist history deployed by early nationalists in a wholly justified effort to paint their colonial oppressors as exactly that. Perhaps the story also serves as a flash point for postcolonial anxiety.

The most famous and influential Indonesian novelist helped to solidify this view of Jalan Raya Pos in both an essay and a film. In 2005, Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer worked on a film about the road. At the time, Pramoedya had only recently been released from house arrest. Pramoedya lived most of his life in a prison of one kind or another. His essays and polemics made him a target of every political regime he lived through, beginning with the colonial regime and most significantly with fourteen years in the infamous Buru Island prison. Pramoedya describes the construction of the Jalan Raya Pos as one of the great tragedies of forced labor and genocide experienced by the Indonesian people. As Pramoedya often does, it is possible that he calls it genocide and describes the situation in extreme terms as a way of indirectly bringing to light another

genocide he only half-mentions: “Only, this time, it was done by native forces to their own people”<sup>26</sup> (Toer 2005:6). Toer uses the stories of the road as a sign to draw the reader’s attention to more recent human rights abuses, his descriptions of bodies by the side of the road signifying other bodies, victims of the anti-communist violence of 1965–66 and the murdered (usually disappeared), beaten, and imprisoned political activists during and right up to the end of the Suharto regime. Yet, perhaps because the histories of the construction itself were largely undocumented, he focuses on the broad histories of the regions crossed by the Great Post Road. His intent is to witness and draw attention to Sundanese and Javanese histories. His thesis: “It’s no secret that behind all excessive wealth is evil, ruthlessness, and cruelty towards those who have no power” (9).

For Toer, the road is a cautionary example of how the promise of modernity is profiteering in disguise. Speed, development, and movement require a human sacrifice. Roads facilitate movement, but whose? And to what ends? As Vernadette Vicuna Gonzalez points out of roads built by the Marcos regime in the Philippines, “roads—and the discourses and practices of mobility they engender—are critical to the workings of imperial modernity and the territorializations, deterritorializations, and reterritorializations of life under globalization” (Gonzalez 2013:50). As tools of colonial and imperial projects, roads promise modernity while extending police and military arms into remote regions. Aimé Césaire writes in *Discourse on Colonialism*,

‘What a godsend!’ you think. ‘The bulldozers! The massive investments of capital! The roads! The ports!’ ...and since you are talking about factories and industries, do you not see the tremendous factory hysterically spitting out its

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<sup>26</sup> I. “Kali ini dilakukan penguasa Pribumi sendiri kepada warganya”

cinders in the heart of our forests? ... do you not see the prodigious mechanization, the mechanization of man? (Césaire, Pinkham, and Kelley 2000: 77)

By including roads and ports as part of the mechanization of human beings, Césaire argues that infrastructures promise is a false one—that the godsend of development obscures deep power imbalances and holds danger. Infrastructural disasters, accidents, and abjection confound because the question of responsibility is often so fraught. Who deserves blame for infrastructural disasters? For the more banal evils of inequalities, displacement, and abject states that infrastructure creates and reinforces? As James Ferguson (2012) points out, infrastructural projects resist blame and responsibility because of how they anonymize and create distance between the material object and the beings responsible for it. It is not enough to blame an individual, but nor is it accurate or satisfying to blame an entire company or a nation state. This is a different kind of mechanization of human beings.

Hauntings arise here—not only ghosts of actual atrocities on the road, but phantoms born from necropolitics. Achille Mbembe first defined necropolitics as the sovereignty of war, terror, and mass destruction over human life. Mbembe describes bulldozing as an essential technique colonial powers use in destabilizing their enemies. He writes,

demolishing houses and cities; uprooting olive trees; riddling water tanks with bullets; bombing and jamming electronic communications; digging up roads; destroying electricity transformers; tearing up airport runways; disabling television and radio transmitters; smashing computers; ransacking cultural and politico-bureaucratic symbols of the proto-Palestinian state; looting medical equipment. In other words, *infrastructural warfare* (2003:29).

Niles Bubandt (2017) suggests that necropolitics is well applied to a much broader scope of political decisions that hold sway over life and death, often, especially in the case of environment disasters, seemingly random or unintended. In this uncertain realm, spirits appear as signs, symptoms, explanations, and exorcisms of disaster. Just as the eruptions of mud at Lusi in East Java are regarded as natural phenomenon with both supernatural and political causes, so the treacherous motor vehicle accidents along Jalur Pantura are natural occurrences that flow from sociopolitical sources—centuries of exploited labor along the road—and the resulting hauntings. As Bubandt writes, “geology is political, politics is corrupt, and corruption is haunted by spirits” (Bubandt 2017: 137).

### **Highway 1**

Nanang and I sat with three other fan group members in a Pertamina parking lot. Behind us were showers where we had both bathed minutes before. My clothes clung to my damp skin. My phone hung from a charger in the wall a foot above my head. To our left, warung Rumah Dua Putra busied itself preparing for the evening meal. In front of us, a hundred meters away, Highway 1, Jalan Raya Pantura, stretched in both directions.

An hour before, Nanang and I had left a dangdut concert. He wanted to get back to his family in Pasuruan, East Java, and I was exhausted from attending three concerts in twenty-four hours and performing at two of them. There’s a night bus leaving soon, he’d told me, heading back towards Surabaya. A few friends from his fan group offered to shuttle us to the pickup point. I bought them all cold Cokes in exchange.

The only other inhabitants of the parking lot were the shower attendant, some stray cats, and a blue truck. The driver was nowhere to be seen. A close-up photograph of

singer Via Vallen covered the left-side cab window (Figure 42). Via Vallen was the star of the moment, a regional koplo singer from Surabaya who rose to fame with the mixed Javanese and Indonesian-language song “Sayang” (“Sweetheart”). Via Vallen had been touring as a singer with orkes Melayu Sera building a fanbase since 2008. By 2018, she’d been voted the most popular dangdut singer in Indonesia and recorded the official song of the 2018 Asian Games. One dangdut band manager told me, “Once she was just like all these other singers. Now she won’t get out of bed for less than a hundred and fifty million rupiah” (around \$10,000 USD at the time).



*Figure 42: A truck parked at a rest stop along Jalan Pantura in Pati, Central Java, decorated with the likeness of kopl superstar Via Vallen. July 2nd, 2018, photo by the author.*

The gas station where Nanang and I sat was in Batangan, a subdistrict between Rembang and Pati. Although I did not realize it at the time, we were not far from where Pramoedya's mother's family grew up, on the alun-alun of Rembang. Kartini, on one of her excursions south from her home in Jepara, might have traveled along the road here. Today, a raggedy group of dangdut fans and a trucker waited outside a gas station along the road.

## **Jalan Pantura: Dangdut on the Road**

During the last half of the twentieth century, the Suharto New Order government widened, improved, and altered the Great Post Road into what is today called Jalan or Jalur Pantura, or Highway 1. After years of only casual use, the road became the central artery of the island as trains fell into disuse and trucking began to dominate as the primary way of moving goods across the island.

There are two components to dangdut along the road. One is the clubs and brothels that line the road, serving men who move, especially truck drivers transporting goods from one end of the island to the other. Sex work is synonymous with these clubs; according to Liliani et al., writing about clubs in Indramayu, dangdut singing is a front for sex work (Liliani et al. 2019). The other facet is bands and singers touring from one concert to another. These two seemingly disparate aspects of dangdut koplo are mutually constitutive and share a common root in industries that move goods from place to place, performing for the communities that spring up along the road to serve truck drivers and produce the goods they carry, celebrating the wealth they produce, and providing rest from their labor.

### **Trucks and Brothels**

Truckers and bus drivers famously blast music and decorate their vehicles with photographs and paintings of dangdut singers. They stop to rest at dangdut clubs and brothels to sing karaoke with women, refresh themselves, sleep, and perhaps take some stimulants before continuing on their journey.



While the English-language version of Tempo's report on the road focuses almost solely on Daendels, history, and technology, the Indonesian-language version (TEMPO 2017) shows the pervasiveness of the road's associations with dangdut, sex work, ghosts, and truckers with six additional chapters omitted from the English-language version. Although Tempo has not commented on this difference, I asked Ipung, a journalist and novelist based in Surabaya, about it. He laughed. "Not all foreigners are interested in dangdut like you." I myself have not found this to be the case. Perhaps the omission reflects a different sort of imagined other, a fascination common among the educated elite in Indonesia with the women on the road. Perhaps the reverse is true; the Tempo team set out to write a history and added chapters in the Indonesian-language version to appeal to an Indonesian audience. Regardless, the additions or omissions show the strength of the road's associations with ghosts, sex work, truckers, and dangdut for Indonesian readers.

Truck painting has become a type of regional folk-art, one advertised appeal of travelling on Pantura highway. According to Nicholas Wila Adi, truckers paint the trucks to represent some aspect of their identity as well as to protect them from danger. Besides accidents on treacherous roads, some quieter stretches of Jalur Pantura are the stomping grounds of highway robbers. Truckers pick designs that make their vehicle easily identifiable in a caravan, ensuring that other truckers will know whether they've made it through a checkpoint. For the truckers who pay off the highway bandits, their art makes the vehicle recognizable and allows them to avoid inconvenience and danger. Adi writes that the art, much like dangdut music itself, paints a portrait of lower socio-economic classes, "a portrait of a difficult life dominated by men, lacking education, crushed by

economic burdens, considering women as sex objects, and so on” (Adi 2019:42). Truck bodies used to be made of wood, the colorful pictures adorning their sides painted by hand. Today, most are like the truck in the photo above: a metal body decorated with stickers. Decorating trucks with funny sayings and beautiful women is a long-standing tradition accompanied by a well-developed industry. Agus, one truck painter interviewed by TEMPO, says his goal is to “treat the aggravation of the driver stuck in traffic behind the truck”<sup>27</sup> (TEMPO 2017, 63). Like the images, dangdut music and the women along the road are an industry meant to lessen the pains of industry for the men who move goods along the road.

According to Tempo’s 2017 report, sex work sprang up along the road as soon as it was built, brothels following the post stations. Today, brothels spring up around truck stops. The truck stops likewise follow ghosts. Take, for example, the section of Pantura currently best known for sex work: Alas Roban, a stretch of heavily wooded coastal land between Semarang and Pekalongan in Central Java. This stretch of road is known to have caused Daendels trouble because the region is both mountainous and heavily wooded, resulting in laborers dying from exhaustion and illness. It is said that the heavy forests make Alas Roban a convenient place to dispose of corpses. Many truckers fear this stretch of road. The twists and turns, ascents and descents in the road cause motor vehicle accidents, but many drivers also claim to see spirits that misdirect them or lead them off the road. As a result, many rest in karaoke clubs and massage parlors to make sure they

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<sup>27</sup> “mengobati kejengkelan pengendara yang terjebak macet dengan posisi terhalang truk di depannya” [I, translation my own] (Tempo 63).

are alert before embarking on the stretch of road that crosses this national forest. According to one study, the citizens of one village decided together to establish restaurants, karaoke clubs, and massage parlors along Jalan Pantura in Alas Roban, recognizing the economic benefits of appealing to truck drivers (Rusniawati et al. 2015). Thus, one of dangdut's associations along Pantura is based in sex work along the road, but dangdut koplo practice is rooted more broadly in the local service industries that cater to the national and international movement of goods.

#### Concerts for Ritual and Celebration

Dangdut koplo along the road is not limited to the fringes of society, whatever sensationalist news reports and tabloids may say. The other main feature of dangdut on the road is the singers and bands who tour along it, hired to perform concerts for wealthy patrons and powerful organizations. For events like weddings, circumcisions, and club parties, patrons hire touring bands and singers to fill the event [*I. mengisi acara*]. In this case, the audiences are stationary, and the caliber of singers and bands they can attract lends prestige to the event. These audiences vary greatly. Many are wealthy families throwing wedding parties. Many are businesses, clubs, and organizations throwing parties to entertain their base and demonstrate their own power and patronage. Here dangdut singers can make the greatest wealth. The cost of that wealth is constant movement.

#### **Journey Three: A Wedding Party**

Singer Nasha Aquila's husband Paijo played kendang for a few smaller bands. One, Pallapa, had suffered a common misfortune in the dangdut koplo world: previously managed by a husband and wife pair, the band had split when the husband and wife

divorced. The wife controlled the famous and popular band New Pallapa, while the husband and his new wife (“Chinese,” Nasha whispered to me earnestly) managed the less-known Pallapa. Nasha, wanting to support her husband, helped the band book some famous singers for a wedding party on August 23, 2018 in Lumajang, East Java.

Unlike Monata, with their fleet of comfortable SUVs, Pallapa had one van for everybody, singers and musicians alike. Nasha and Paijo decided to drive their own vehicle. “Kasihlan Andrea [poor Andrea],” they said, implying that my health and welfare would somehow be at risk if I rode in the van with the musicians. Secretly, I suspected Paijo was behind the decision; a rare Indonesian man who did not smoke, Paijo abhorred cigarette smoke, which would surely fill the van.

Around 10am I caught a Grab taxi to Nasha’s home in Sidoarjo, backpack with change of clothes in hand. Nasha greeted me excitedly. After saying hello to her family, we piled into the car. Paijo drove, she sat in the front seat, and I stretched out in the middle. Paijo played Avril Lavigne and Aerosmith.

First, we all met at the manager’s home. He introduced me to his parents and friends, who were busy with *reog* instruments and masks for Independence Day celebrations. They enthusiastically showed me some dance steps while we waited for the other band members and singers to arrive (Figure 43).



*Figure 43: The author (left front) learning some dance steps from the family of the manager of OM Palapa, August 2018. Photo by Nasha Aquila.*

As we were about to leave, the manager's mother grabbed my hand. What she said to me hinted yet again at the underlying danger the road poses to sexual reputation. "My son," she told me, "is living in sin with his Chinese wife." I started, confused. Her eyes filled with tears. "She is not good like you." I patted her hand uncomfortably and considered the roots of her perception: the danger she perceived from the life of a traveling musician, the uneven racial stereotypes that turned me into an innocent and his wife into a sinner. This woman bemoaned her son's lifestyle.

Nasha gently pulled me away and toward the car. The first order of operations was snacks, as it often is. We stopped at Indomaret. I found my favorite lemon cookies, and Nasha told me not to be shy, because the manager was paying.

Snacks acquired, we departed for Lumajang. The hours ticked by in the car (Figure 44). At first, Nasha pushed for a jovial atmosphere. Paijo played mellow rock from the early 2000s. Nasha chatted amiably with me and encouraged me to ask questions, more questions, even, than I had the energy to construct. Paijo calmed her enthusiasm somewhat.





*Figure 44: The view of Java from Nasha's car along Highway 1. Photo by the author.*

As we neared Lumajang and dusk fell, Nasha started to anxiously look for food. She knew of one warung, she said, but couldn't remember the exact street. Where was it again? She insisted we go to that one, because, she said, we were entering a region of Java with a heavy Madurese population. Nasha often expressed thinly veiled disdain for the Madurese ethnic minority, who, because of employment, have settled in many areas along the north coast of East Java. In this case, she wrinkled her nose. "They eat too much beef. It's too heavy." When we finally found the warung, we relaxed for a moment, taking selfies and picking apart fried fish with our right hands. She ordered two fish for me and scolded me when I failed to eat both: "That fish's life was given in vain!"

Soon it was time to go. We packed back into the car and headed for a Pertamina station near the concert venue. Singers often shower at Pertamina stations, paying about Rp5.000 rupiah to a tired attendant for the privilege. I removed my clothes and hung them precariously on two rickety hangers over the door while I dabbed myself with soap and splashed myself with water with a hand bucket. With no towel, I slipped back into my clothes, which stuck to my damp body. At this concert, I had specified early, I would not be singing. I was there purely as a researcher. I had no performance clothes. But singers rarely put their performance clothing on in the Pertamina. Although I never asked why, I imagine doing so would mark them in a way that would make them feel uncomfortable and bring inconvenient attention. A dangdut singer at a concert venue is protected by a bevy of security forces and fans. A dangdut singer alone at a gas station is vulnerable.



Fortunately, at this concert venue, singers had access to a changing room. We arrived another hour later and met the other singers, the manager, the band, and the MC. The hosts, the father and mother of the bride, gave us space in their guest room. The wedding party left us snacks and water, and the bride moved in and out of the room in a variety of different outfits. The singers began to put on makeup and rolled their hair into curling rolls and pins (Figure 45) The MC hunched over a set list (Figure 46), trying to reconcile the songs the band had rehearsed with the songs the hosts had requested last-minute.



*Figure 45: Singers getting ready and discussing the setlist in Lumajang, East Java. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 46: The MC works on finalizing the setlist in the bride's family's front room.*

Then someone—most likely a member of the hired security team or a fan group member—gave the signal, and we were led to the stage. The unsteady platform was covered as it always was with gigantic strips of red felt. A mass of hundreds crowded towards the stage, an especially rowdy group. We sat, as singers always do, at the back of the platform, mostly obscured from view except for the brave souls who creep around the side of the platform in search of a selfie.

Compared to the singers who performed with Monata, this group had lower status. Besides Nasha Aquila, who sang with them to support her husband, and Ratna Antika, who promised to perform as a favor to Nasha, the other singers had less clout. Nasha ignored most of them and checked her phone anxiously, wondering when Ratna Antika would arrive from her last show. The MC shook his head; they would have to start the

show without her. The singers slowly, almost reluctantly, slipped their shoes on and picked their way over the electrical cables, single file, holding onto one another, traipsing onto the stage for the “All Artis” number, the first official number of a dangdut koplo event. They filed to the stage, whispering to each other what the All Artis song would be. There were only a few microphones, so one singer, putting on a show of reluctance, took the first verse, then passed her microphone along. The rest of the singers danced in a line (Figure 47), focusing their attention on the patrons—the bride and groom, and their mothers and fathers—who stood from their seats on the side of the stage to give singers *saweran*, usually large 50.000 or 100.000 rupiah bills, waving them at the audience and sometimes in our faces before handing them over.



*Figure 47: The second All Artis at Lumajang, East Java. From left: Riska Risma, Selly Monica, Unknown singer, Ratna Antika, Fitriana, Putri Rahaya, Cindy Marenta, Nasha Aquila.*

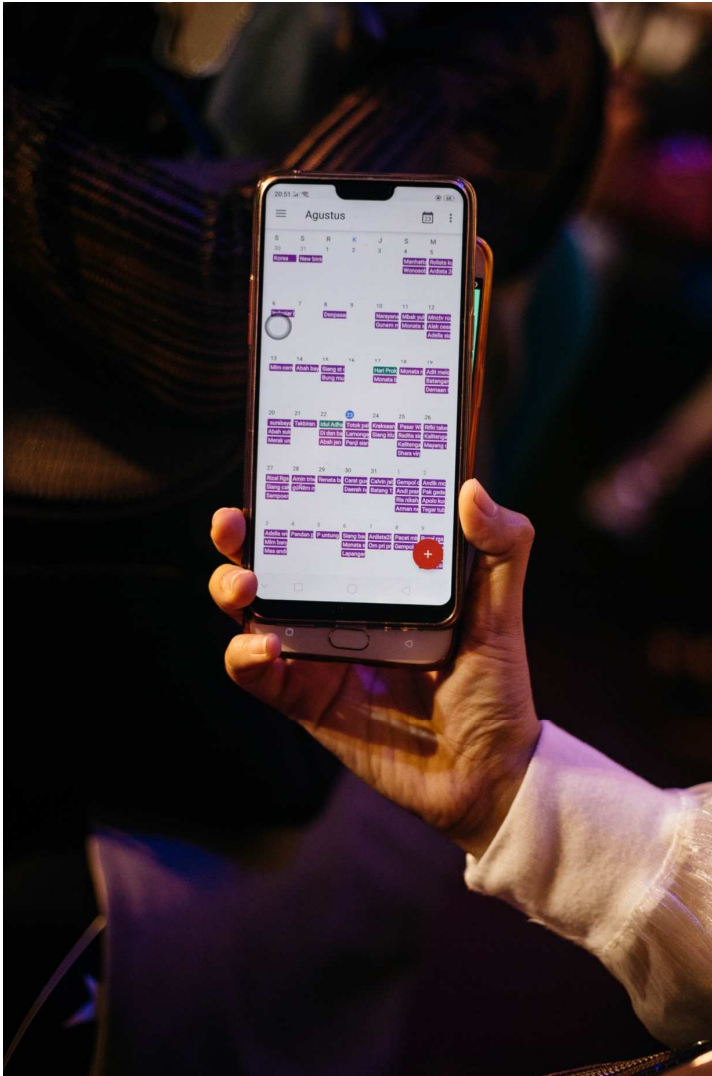
During “All Artis,” singers tended to be subdued. They almost never tried to draw focus to themselves or one-up each other. In stark contrast, singers overdid their

performance of reluctance. Their steps to the stage were slow and measured, and they readily passed the microphone on and even avoided it, as though performing were an inconvenience. After the song ended, they clopped back to their corner, gingerly stepping around cables and boxes of food.

Ratna Antika finally arrived at the wedding, and the hosts and band breathed a sigh of relief. Ratna Antika was the headliner, an incredibly talented and charismatic artist of regional fame. That night, she had come straight from another show in the practice of doubling up [*J. ngropel*], in which famous singers who have reached the level of guest star can perform their set of three songs at one concert, take their payment, and immediately leave for the next show. Guest stars do not have set contracts with a single band; instead, they are popular enough that patrons request them personally. Singers want to become guest stars more than anything, Ratna Antika told me, because it means the potential to make five times the money in the same amount of time. Of course, this is not without effort, as I recorded in my fieldnotes from that night:

Once a singer reaches a certain level of success, the patron of the event might request her specifically. This makes her a guest star, a *bintang tamu*, rather than a regular, contracted singer. *Bintang tamu* hold the right to arrive at the concert at their leisure, sing three songs of their choosing, and leave for another event. Ratna Antika, an accomplished East Javanese singer of regional fame, was a sought-after guest star. Laughing, she pulled out her phone and opened a calendar application. “Each purple line is a show,” she told me. She had booked five or more shows a day, most days, until the end of August (Field notes August 23, 2018, see Figure 48).





*Figure 48: Ratna Antika's concert schedule. Photo by the author.*

In practice, this means an enormous amount of time spent on the road. Singers book shows carefully by location, considering the logistics of travel between cities and negotiating for more if the travel will be strenuous. When Ratna Antika arrived, the patrons called for a second “All Artis” number, this one much more lively than the first with the addition of the honored guest star (Figure 49).



*Figure 49: Ratna Antika charming the crowd. Audience members take out their smartphones to record her headlining performance. Lumajang, East Java, August 2018. Photo by the author.*

At the end of the night, we were invited to eat the leftovers from the wedding meal. The crew broke down the stage. We ate quickly and piled back into the cars. Nasha went straight to the backseat, changed back into a casual t-shirt and sweatpants, and wiped the makeup from her face. We headed back to the Pertamina first to finally use the bathroom—in the six hours we spent in Lumajang, we'd been given space to put on makeup, but not granted access to a bathroom. Singers are accustomed to this; and since they are sequestered onstage for the duration of the performance, it rarely makes much difference whether they have access to a bathroom or not. If singers know they will need a bathroom—for example, if they have a particularly heavy period flow—they will claim to be sick and cancel the booking.

### **Singers on the Road: Gas Station Idols**

To tour, a singer must already have achieved a certain level of fame or a secure contract with a band. Every dangdut singer wants to become famous enough to be requested by far away audiences. Like Kartini, dangdut singers see in the road, if not the promise of the advancement of women, the promise of their own advancement, the freedom the road offers to travel, economically support their families and communities, and gain fame. However, the road itself can also be drudgery, bringing singers to the brink of exhaustion, separating them from their families, and opening them up a to myriad of risks—of car accidents, sexual assault, and damage to their reputation. Even with the struggle of the road, singers transform narratives and norms with their movement. Rachmi Diyah Larasati writes, “I am astounded by how the dancing bodies that travel recreate historiography, erasing and reproducing new narratives within the postmodern space, traditional in their roots but without traces of violence, like sparks in the wind” (2016: “The Courtly Dancing Goddess”). While not free from hauntings, singers aspire to travel as freely as those sparks.

#### **Freedom? Of Movement: Mobility and Aspiration**

Freedom to travel, freedom of movement, is one right granted to dangdut singers that most other women do not get. Most women in Java without formal education cannot drive and rarely leave their hometown. Dangdut singers of regional fame can usually drive their own cars and get to travel around the island at will. Freedom of movement, freedom to move. Nasha Aquila told me of her early days as a performer that before she had a car, she would have to ride fully dressed on a motorcycle to her destination. “I

would arrive soaked in rain and have to do the show wet through!” she told me. A car was infinitely better.

I leaned forward in the front seat as Nasha drove. Her upper body leaned into the steering wheel, her hands clenching. She forced a laugh. “Paijo is already at rehearsal, so I’m driving today.” She hesitatingly lowered the car from the television studio parking lot to the main road, Jalan Ahmad Yani. With a bit of jolt as we changed gears, we headed south to rehearsal, stopping at McDonalds for a quick meal on the way. “This is the life of a singer,” she told me. “I always have to go. I never get to rest. It’s always from one show to another.”

#### Women on the Road: Gender, Danger, and Risk Management

In the previous chapter, I explain the danger singers face from performing: rowdy audiences, grabby patrons, and stigma about being sexually available for a price. These risks are compounded by the road, especially when singers travel alone. Besides the practical concerns—the unbearable traffic jams that stifle the North Coast Highway, the poor quality of the road and likelihood of accidents, the exhausting nights spent in the car—traveling alone is considered odd for women, opening them up to a host of real and imagined dangers. I will discuss how this relates to fandom in the next chapter, but singers are not immune.

Band management has a vested interest in protecting singers when they’re on the job. One unique factor of dangdut koplo practice is that singers move independently of bands. Patrons hire the band, which then attempts to book singers in accordance with the budget and requests of the patron. While bands often have “regulars,” singers with whom



they have often worked or who started their careers with that band, loyalty between singers and bands is tenuous. Bands and singers move in separate but overlapping circles, and band management knows that offending a popular singer or putting her in danger may mean she refuses to perform with them again. As fame increases, so does the need to maintain respectability. This concept is crucial to understanding how singers take power in dangdut koplo. The more successful the singer, the less she associates with the band. Singers and bands have developed a series of unspoken mitigation techniques: cars themselves, security forces, the layout of stages, family members, and gender separation practices all contribute to protecting singers' reputations. Singers themselves perform a studied disinterest to avoid being seen as greedy or obscene.

The first way singers perform disinterest is by arriving in their own separate cars. A car is a crucial place of refuge for singers of dangdut koplo, a means of transportation, a private dressing room, a place to sleep, and a symbol of their success. She comes from another show in a nearby area, already dressed in show clothes. She arrives at the concert location in that car, her driver saying "Pak, ada artis" to the guard as they pull up to the kampung or the open field. The "artis," the singer herself, guards her visibility. She wants the audience to know she's arrived, and she wants to cause a stir, but she avoids direct contact. She may still be changing clothes, fixing hair, or putting on makeup in the backseat. If not, she'll sit hunched over her cellphone, posting selfies from the last show or advertising the next one. The car is ushered to a relatively covered, isolated area with easy access to the stage.

When the time is right, when the show is about to start, or right away if she's late, a combination of the band management, security, and fan group arrives—a makeshift security force—to usher her to the stage. Singers clutch shawls around their necks and pick their way across the packed, muddy field with their show shoes and purses clasped in their hands. Audience members are usually polite, teenage boys looking on with awe, sometimes brave enough to snap a photograph. The dangdut koplo singer responds to these interruptions and requests with patience, keeping in mind that fandom is something to encourage, that no publicity is bad publicity, and that accusations that they are *sombong* [E. arrogant, conceited, or aloof] are extremely damaging to their careers. Yet the system in place is relatively controlled, keeping the singer separate from the audience, and even from the band.

The more famous the singer, the more safeguards are put in place for her. Band managers know that treating singers badly and leaving them open to risks means that the singers won't want to tour with that band anymore. Singers have significant caché with the person who puts on the party [I. *tuan rumah, orang hajat*] in particular, who usually request that the band book specific singers. Band managers do not want to risk losing a singer.

Once performers are on the stage, the ladder or steps leading up to it are often removed, essentially blocking anyone besides approved personnel, usually the main patron and his (almost always his) family, friends, or supporters. The backstage area is only a collection of plastic chairs lined up in a rectangle behind the band, separated from them only by speakers, cables, and boxes for instruments and electrical equipment. On

the back side of the stage, the backdrop usually provides another barrier against wandering listeners. Singers are thus effectively isolated from view and interaction with the audience at large (see Figure 50). Backstage, singers make a studied effort to appear relaxed and disinterested, as described in Chapter 2. In contrast with their onstage persona, when waiting to perform singers deliberately act disinterested in the proceedings. Singers attempt to perform the physical behaviors associated with professionalism and a refined nature by focusing on their smartphones and avoiding returning the gaze of the band and the audience. This performance of disinterest is hierarchical; the most famous singers will greet each other enthusiastically, sit together, take selfies, and gossip quietly, while younger singers with less experience sit quietly and only join the conversation when asked directly.



*Figure 50: Security forces, a raised stage, and the backdrop block average audience members from getting access to singers in their downtown. Pasuruan, East Java. Photo by the author.*

After the show, the singer often remains to take selfies with fans. She stays in the corner as the field empties out, honoring only the fans brave enough to come close. Her head is down, her face in her phone, and she gathers her shawl around her shoulders again.

She is often then invited to sit with the patrons, perhaps eating some leftover food from the event. This is the riskiest moment of the night, when the audience slips away and the gender lines are broken without their watchful gaze. Nasha Aquila once whispered to me, as I was impatient to leave and get some sleep, “Andrea, don’t you know who this is? He paid for the whole event. You should show him more respect. I want to get hired back!” (personal comments, October 2018). In these situations, singers guard each other. They sit together and eat together. When the *tuan rumah* comes by, singers laugh and smile, carefully, though, not wanting to laugh and smile too much more than the others. The opinions of fellow singers matter. They leave at the same time, holding the patron’s hand to their foreheads one by one in that same exaggeration of polite deference that pleases the patron even as it protects them.

Back in their cars, the singers pull her cellphones out again, snapping a few selfies and tracking the impact of her earlier posts. She tells her driver to pull off at a Pertamina gas station. Pajamas in hand, she pays 2.000 rupiah for a shower and toilet. She gingerly removes the false eyelashes and color-change contact lenses, wipes her face clean, and emerges from the gas station again as herself, unguarded. She returns to the car and curls up, earbuds in, for the drive home.

From my perspective, life on the road was far from glamorous. Even when the cars were comfortable, the journeys were exhausting to my spoiled body used to a steady sleep schedule. How we slept, where and how we bathed, every part of the process contradicted the image of the glamorous, relaxed, petulant, and lazy dangdut singer often perpetuated by popular opinion. Yet singers themselves, these gas station idols, rarely complained.

#### Haunting Singers: Accidents, Exhaustion, and Failure

Accidents were common along Pantura, and for all their care, dangdut singers were touched by them often. Singers themselves suffered injuries from the road, and traffic accidents were a frequent cause of death among young singers, including Dewi Angin in 2013 and Chacha Sherly in 2021. Chacha Sherly, a prominent singer and one-time member of the group Trio Macan, died as a passenger in a seven-vehicle collision. Newspaper articles at the time treated her death as a tragedy and listed posts from fellow celebrities mourning her passing (Rantung 2021). Dewi Angin, who reached only regional prominence and was driving the vehicle herself at the time of the accident, received somewhat less respectful treatment, with sensational articles chronicling her strange behavior before the accident and her inability to control her vehicle (Sindoradio 2013). Less prominent singers who lack the protection of a well-tuned vehicle suffer more often and face additional social disapproval for their lifestyle and travel habits. Singers avoid dwelling on the losses and dangers, knowing it makes no difference for their responsibilities, but they maintain their cars carefully, hire experienced drivers, and check on them often to make sure they sleep during concerts. Which road to take—which

is fastest, safest, etc.—is a point of contention in most singer vehicles as soon as they turn off the main road, and, now that the new toll road is open, even before.

As discussed in Chapter 2, singers fear that their lifestyle will lead to illness and exhaustion. During busy months, they work as hard as possible to make enough money to live on for the rest of the year. While performing up to five shows a day, dieting to maintain their ideal body weight, eating gas station snacks and in unfamiliar restaurants, constantly updating social media, and undergoing regular skin-whitening infusions, singers remind each other to guard their health [I. *jaga kesehatan*], knowing that getting sick means losing out on income they need.

What haunts singers most, however, is the fear of failure, of becoming irrelevant and falling into obscurity. When asked about their hopes for the future of their careers, singers do not say they hope for fame and fortune. Instead, they say they only hope to continue creating new works [I. *terus berkarya*] and to keep existing as artists [I. *tetap eksis*]. In this context, *karya* does not refer to new works in the sense of new compositions. *Berkarya* here can simply mean “to work.” By *karya*, singers mean something akin to opportunity, to have opportunities to keep working, perform, to create music videos and make recordings, etc. In short, their expressed hope for their futures is to keep going, to work as they currently work, to travel the road as long as they can.

#### **Journey Four: *Ngropel***

By the last tour of my fieldwork, I knew better what to expect from the road. However, I still found the process difficult and taxing. I again traveled with singer Nasha Aqila and her husband Paijo, but this time we traveled independently of any band.

It was early October, and the concert schedule had just begun to pick up again after the quiet lunar month of Sura. Nasha contacted me with two opportunities. “We’ll leave Saturday morning, sing a show in Rembang (Central Java), then drive all night and sing a show in Surabaya in the morning.” I gaped at her and she laughed away my nerves. “Paijo will drive,” she comforted me.

Around 11am I arrived at her home in Sidoarjo. Our next stop was a glitzy service station, Honda brand, with a large parking lot, free brewed coffee, and glittering clean floors. Nasha and I perused magazines and took selfies to post to social media as we sat on the red faux leather seats. The oil change cost about 100,000 rupiah, or about \$7. Nasha’s husband, Paijo, drove the several hours West that night, and then all the way back after the show.

Our time on the road was mostly spent sleeping. I had initially hoped that singers would rehearse or practice in the car. I found that, at least while I was present, they rarely practiced there. Sometimes they would plug in headphones and hum along to a song on their phone, or perform a Google search for lyrics, but more often we would gossip, post on social media, listen to music quietly, or sleep. Pajamas and a pillow of some kind are two of a singer’s most crucial supplies on the road. In lieu of an actual pillow, many rest their heads on cute stuffed animals, which better display economic status and style. I brought Foxy Loxy, a stuffed animal fox I’d bought from a Miniso in Surabaya, to cushion my head against the car window as I tried to sleep through the night.

The drive to Rembang was much further and more vigorous than the one to Lumajang. Jalan Pantura between Gresik and Rembang lacks toll roads and is often little more than a two-lane highway. Because of the significant traffic, the road crawls.

When we bathed, and bathing twice a day was obligatory, we bathed in service stations or rest stops by the side of the road. As we neared the show location, we would pull over at a Pertamina gas station or a similar type of way station. Finished, we would return to the back of the car, loading our suitcases out of the trunk and into the back seat, where we would change our clothes. Nasha had mirrors hanging on the back of every car seat of her mini-SUV (Figure 51). She would change into her costume and apply makeup, working against the jolts and turns of the car. At the location, she would emerge from the car an idol. Singers must always appear fresh and beautiful. They must be otherworldly. No one would know we bathed at the Pertamina.





*Figure 51: One of Nasha Aquila's in-vehicle makeup stations. Photo by the author.*

The concert venue was more often than not in a field some distance from the main road. As we neared the location, the lights in the sky would guide us. When we arrived, we would be stopped by *tukang parking*, a parking guard. We would roll down the window to reveal just a glimpse of our faces and clothing and say the passwords: “ada artis, pak! (there are singers in the car!)” We would pull up close to the stage and emerge from the vehicle, shawls over our shoulders, our performance shoes clasped in our hands, handbags hanging from our arms. Guided by a security guard or member of a fan club, we would trudge through the mud and climb the ladder to the stage.

The band this time was New Kendedes. Based in Kediri, they were playing a show in Pati that night. New Kendedes is unique in the dangdut koplo world because the band is all women. I will discuss them more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

After the concert, Nasha and I took the obligatory selfies with fans who rushed the stage. The stage, built, like it often is, by a local team, began to collapse. Nasha sprang into action. Ordering everyone off the stage, she pulled me to the stairs.

“Has a stage ever collapsed before?” I asked.

“Oh, all the time!” she said.

We found Paijo napping in the car, parked at the end of the dirt field. He’d driven all the way there, and now it was time to turn around and drive back. We grabbed our suitcases and piled into the car. After a stop at a gas station to use the bathroom and wash our faces and a quick snack at a warung, Nasha and I settled in to sleep. We stretched out on the seats of the SUV with pillows and stuffed animals to prop up our heads. Paijo played rock hits from the early 2000s to stay awake as he drove. The gentle rock of the car lulled us to a fitful sleep.

“Honey bear, wake up!” Nasha prodded me gently with a laugh. She’d started calling me honey bear after she overheard me refer to my significant other that way, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her the term of endearment didn’t easily transfer. “We’re here!”

Indeed, we were. We were parked on the side of a campus road at the State University of Surabaya, UNESA. It was 6am. The concert would begin at 8am. I protested being awoken so early, but Nasha insisted it was time to shower and get ready.

Shower? I groggily looked around at the deserted road. What could she mean? I waited while she gathered her things, nursing leftover coffee from the morning before. A smiling young woman in a hijab appeared outside the car. Nasha got out to talk to her, then beckoned me out as well. With soap and clothing in hand, we followed the young woman to the women's pool locker room.

The room was yellowed, with open windows and dirty floors. Only one shower had working plumbing, a stream into a bucket on the ground, so Nasha and I took turns behind the curtain. I washed my face and body and brushed my teeth, spitting on the floor and washing it down the drain with the bucket. I dabbed my body dry with my pajamas and pulled on a pink lace top and jeans before emerging right as the swim team walked in. They looked shocked, then giggled and peppered me with questions as I started to put makeup on in the mirror. My hair was hopelessly greasy, so I braided it quickly.

Eventually we returned to the car and prepared to make our way to the stage. Other cars had filled in behind ours, and a crowd was starting to grow. Paijo had fallen asleep again in the driver's seat. I nursed the few swallows of cold coffee I'd saved in a thermos from the morning before; singers, as a rule, did not drink coffee close to showtime, only tea. My eyes were burning from lack of proper rest, but when I moved to leave the car with glasses still on instead of contact lenses, Nasha shook her head.

"Andrea, this concert is being recorded. Do you really want to have glasses on in the video? Everyone will see this. You need to look your best."

I put my contact lenses in my dry eyes and left the glasses in the car. We climbed the stage in the dusty field and the show began.

## **Aspirations and Mobility**

Mobility has come to define the contemporary human condition as never before, involving long-range and frequent movement that impinges on or even define the everyday life of people from all backgrounds and social strata [...] However, at the same time, it could be argued that never before have so many people felt so deeply the consequences of their exclusion from a condition where mobility is embraced as a correlate of freedom (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012:460).

Aspiration for dangdut singers is driven by a positive image of the future and a determination to give everything. This positivity and hope, so reminiscent of Kartini, I saw reflected in young people all around me in Surabaya. I once asked my English class how they felt about the future: hopeful or fearful. Unanimously, this group of twenty young adults responded that they felt positive. In fact, they looked mystified by the question. “You have to be positive!” one young woman said incredulously.

The hope belies the struggles and risks of the road. The lives of older singers are not always so happy. Many fall prey to substance abuse. Others (most, as Lenny and Yuli told me in Chapter 2) become second wives. And this does not take into account singers who never tour, who never make it out of their own kampung or the club.

Why do they do it? Why do singers subject themselves to the danger of the road? As described in the previous chapter, singers fly along the road because of their aspiration for mobility: economic mobility for themselves and their families and physical mobility for themselves. These two reasons sometimes seem to oppose each other, but actually form two sides of the same instinct. On one hand, they want to support their families and communities. Singers often have no other realistic career choices. Many strategize to make as much money as they can while young and try to start other

businesses along the way with that wealth. They know providing a living, while requiring sacrifice, is a great service.

On the other hand, they want to stand out, to move, to draw the gaze of the public and be known. Singers like Nasha Aquila are driven by the desire to impress, stand out, and be thought well of. Singing is a way to stand out. However, standing out for them is not a purely self-centered instinct. In fact, it is based in an anxiety that, if they do not stand out, they will fall into obscurity, poverty, and hunger. Nasha is driven by these desires and anxieties. For her, the road produces paired anxiety and promise. If she stops moving, she fears, she'll disappear.

#### Arriving in Jakarta

The road is a material channel. It carries singers, bands, and fan groups from one point to another. The potholes, traffic, heat, and roadside stalls shape the experience of touring more than perhaps any other single facet of the trip. But the road is also a symbolic road, a road to Jakarta and the television studios. Much like Detroit, Nashville, or Hollywood, Jakarta exists in the imaginations of dangdut singers as a Mecca for media. While influential recording studios exist all over the country, and many—arguably more—singers become superstars through East Java, all major television stations record in Jakarta, and young, inexperienced singers see Jakarta as an end goal, the route to fame. More established singers who have tried to live in Jakarta see it differently. After experiencing the corruption and abuse described in Chapter 2, they leave Jakarta seeing it as only a means to expand influence beyond the local. They go on television in order to get more live shows, because the live shows pay so much more and

do not force singers to face the unfamiliar corruption of the studios. The road, Jalan Pantura, is a road in two directions.<sup>28</sup> It goes from East Java to the West, then back again.

Many established, older koplo singers told me horror stories about Jakarta. Lenny traveled there in the early 2000s to audition for singing competition shows. While there, she was invited to record a single. She was lied to, however. She was asked to put up money to pay for song rights, the recording process, and fees for television and radio stations, but in the end the man pocketed most of it and Lenny traveled back East toward Surabaya with only a few copies of her recordings and bitter experience to show for it.

Nasha and Paijo likewise told horror stories about trying to make a living in Jakarta. Their managers put them up in shared apartments, often quite nice, they said, but they were paid nearly nothing, hardly enough to eat in a day. Nasha had the opportunity to be signed to a major label, but she turned them down, disenchanted.

Dangdut koplo singers do not settle easily into lives in Jakarta. As Johan, then the head of talent for MNCTV's dangdut singing competition show KDI (*Kontes Dangdut Indonesia*) told me, "It's difficult to hold onto singers from East Java. They're used to making a lot of money with very little work. Here, they have to sit patiently, wait for hours, and they get paid very little. We can't hold onto them. They come to make a name for themselves, to get a little more popular, and then they go back to touring with boosted

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<sup>28</sup> The dangdut koplo circuit is thus closer to the Chop Suey and Chitlin' Circuits (see Kwan 2011; Lauterbach 2012). Though koplo singers do not face ethnic or racial discrimination as those performers did, they do face social class discrimination, their music generally more accepted at outdoor parties than in the cold Jakarta studios, relegating them to continued circulation instead of fancy concert venues. I will discuss this further in the conclusion.

revenue.” As he framed it, they lacked the patience and the foresight to be willing to play the studio game, to pay their dues for the promise of occasional screen time.

When dangdut koplo singers do go to Jakarta, most stay only for a moment, to film an episode of this talk show or that one, or to make a guest appearance on a singing competition show. Their intent is not to make a career in the cold studios of Jakarta, but rather to boost their popularity and the power of their names. Performing on television carries clout, clout that results in higher paychecks and more bookings from patrons on the dangdut road. Even singers like Inul Daratista and Rita Sugiarto, superstars who have made a secure living in Jakarta, return to the road regularly to reap the greater financial benefits.

When singers arrive in Jakarta, with promise of jobs, opportunities, and exposure, the promise of the road rarely pays off. The arrival they sought is nowhere to be found in Jakarta. Singers find that, while Jakarta offers exposure, it does not offer security, economic success, or a better life. East Javanese television and recording studios offer more flexibility, if lower production values and smaller viewership.<sup>29</sup> And so, they turn back to the road, where there is money to be made, and from which they can, at least sometimes, go home to their families to rest. The road to Jakarta is thus for singers not like the road west to Hollywood. Jakarta is only a temporary destination. The real destination is the road itself, the ability to keep moving and keep striving.

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<sup>29</sup> DD Star Records in Kediri, DSA Records in Gresik, Aneka Safari Records and Sandi Record in Banyuwangi, Teta Record in Madiun, and Perdana Record Surabaya are some notable examples of successful local production.

## The Great Toll Road and Modernizing Projects

Pantura continues to transform with the impacts of the Trans Java Toll project [I. *Jalan Tol Trans Jawa*]. Jokowi officially opened the road to the public in December 2018, and it opened fully in January 2019. At the time of the December opening, he tweeted, “From Jakarta, Semarang, all the way to Surabaya, you have your choice for your vacation route. In addition to the normal road, the Trans Java Toll Road connects you for 760 km. The road is smooth, the views are gorgeous: mountains, rice fields, villages, interchanges, bridges, local restaurants and rest areas. Enjoy your trip” (Muhammad 2019). The new toll roads, only some of which were completed at the time of fieldwork, will cut a new path through the island. Particularly in East Java, the toll road avoids the coast altogether, instead crossing far south, directly north of Solo, before slowly ascending to Surabaya by way of Mojokerto (Figure 52).



Figure 52: Existing and planned Trans-Java Toll Road, per October 2015. Map by Gunawan Kartapranata.

It remains to be seen how much the toll roads will transform dangdut koplo along Pantura. The audiences along the north coast, many of whom are ethnically Madurese or work for shipping or fishing companies, may not see a significant change in livelihood. As for the movement of goods along land, it is likely many truckers will move their



routes to the new toll roads. The dangdut clubs and brothels may dry up, the crazed cacophony of dangdut and car horns giving way to something spread apart, clean, fast, and orderly—all the markers of modernity Kartini would have appreciated.

As for the singers who travel, they seem to agree with Kartini. Nasha always insisted on taking the toll road whenever one was available, the Honda SUV glinting as we sped by the salt fields of Gresik. “Why would I take Highway 1 until I needed to?” she laughed. “It takes long enough!” For most East Javanese singers, speed and ease are priorities. The road also aligns with their pro-Jokowi politics. In 2018, most singers supported President Jokowi’s reelection and the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, or PDI-P [I: *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan*]. Both Via Vallen and Nella Kharisma, the superstar dangdut koplo performers of that year, endorsed Jokowi and performed at party rallies.

The new toll roads have their own ghosts. People post about these ghosts on social media and send information via WhatsApp, their presence and absence the purview of accusations of fake news and hoaxes. These are politicized economic phantoms. The roads are haunted by the specter of foreign (and especially Chinese) investment. Muhammed Ikhlas, a Surabayan in a pressed white collared shirt with an imported Mac laptop, echoed the opinion of many young, educated, ambitious, conservative men when he complained of foreign investment and jobs controlling the toll road project. “Of course we want the road to be modern,” he told me, “but why should all the money go to China? We need jobs and investment here.” Others were concerned about government corruption in the process of awarding contracts, and that the money would flow, not to China, but to

large Indonesian corporations at the expense of smaller ones (Maftuchan 2016). Both fears, though seemingly opposed, reflect the commonly-held suspicion that infrastructure projects will not serve regular people—in contrast, that they will exploit their labor and force them out of their homes.

The Great Toll Road is haunted by another phantom: those displaced and forgotten. While regionally successful singers who tour along the road celebrate their new speed and shiny SUVs, other singers at dangdut clubs along Pantura may watch their clientele thin out. Despite the stereotypes of low-class, crass behavior along Pantura, the road brought wealth and new business. Deputy Executive Director Sigit Murwito of the Regional Autonomy Implementation Committee points out that as a whole the north coast is far better developed than the south because of high mobility of goods and the industrial zones and factories which grew up around the road (TEMPO 2015:15). Moving that traffic southward in East Java will surely mean closures of factories and industries, not to mention the dangdut clubs that service truck drivers and the parties that promote worker morale. Dangdut is resilient, but surely the Great Toll Road, moving goods and singers, will change forever the fabric of the cities on the North Coast.

### **Postscript**

As it did for many of us, the significance of mobility for singers came into focus when Indonesia locked down to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in spring of 2020. Concerts halted. Clubs shut down. Though most of the roads stayed open, singers had nowhere to go.

Many tried to cope by doubling down on social media. Some tried to make some money from product promotion. Others tried to build their own image by staying connected with fans. They devoted their energy to YouTube channels that showed their everyday life. They recorded songs from their living rooms. Posted with the hashtag #dirumahaja, an Indonesian version of #stayathome, their online personas were peppy, determined, and family oriented. Surabaya native Niken Aprilia, regionally famous singer and fashion designer, posted a compilation video of herself and other koplo singers working in their kitchens in honor of Kartini Day, April 21, 2020. Without makeup, hair slicked into ponytails, wearing housedresses or shorts, and some wearing hijabs, this video enacted the apex of a recent trend. While singers in years passed told me they were encouraged to keep their married and family life a secret, the influence of social media had eroded that tradition. Social media celebrity requires the sheen of authenticity, and social media was all that was left to singers when the virus hit. Niken wrote as a caption: “backstage of the glamorous life onstage...we are still wives managing homes.” Then, she wrote “featuring these supermoms:” and tagged nine other singers.<sup>30</sup>

Behind this positive, community-building engagement, however, their livelihoods were in crisis. Their monetized social media accounts, mainly YouTube, had counted little toward their income in the past, but suddenly social media was the main way to make an income. Social media monetization boomed in Indonesia at the start of the

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<sup>30</sup> dibalik layar glamournya dunia panggung...kita tetaplh IBU RT (ibu rumah tangga) □ #staysafe #stayhealthy #staystrong #stayhome para supermom □ @renirey01 @erni\_diahnita @ayusantosoo @vennyangel\_dapurremen @anisa\_rahma.arr98 @ayundaratnaamelia @renamoviesofficial @anjaragustin16 @niken\_aprillia23 @dewirere\_Post by Niken Aprilia on Facebook, Tuesday, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

pandemic, but inconsistencies in pay schedules and the explosion in the number of content creators made it an unreliable and saturated source of income. One singer said about the impacts: “It’s already been one month staying in the house...we’ve already spent our savings. Singing jobs are cancelled until August. So it’ll be five months in the house, no jobs and no income at all. We’re more likely to die of starvation than coronavirus. And the government isn’t giving us anything, not even food money.”<sup>31</sup>

The situation shows the ways in which a neoliberal, colonial situation requiring women to move along the road has been normalized. Before COVID-19, singers seemed to have triumphed over their circumstances. Women without much formal education or career opportunity, they rose by virtue of sheer will and determination to become the primary breadwinners for their extended families and to fly across the country on smooth paved roads in air-conditioned vehicles. Yet in a disaster, as their income comes to a standstill, their government turns aside. Their triumph is now a mark of difference; as women who move they are viewed with suspicion, and their glamorous stage personas belie economic precarity to jealous communities. Singers long again for the road, for its promise of opportunity.

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<sup>31</sup> “Indonesia lockdown...Sudah 1 bulan dirumah terus...uang tabungan habis untuk keperluan makan dan lainnya. Job nyanyi dibatalkan sampai agustus. Jadi 5 bulan kita dirumah tidak ada pekerjaan dan tidak ada pemasukan apapun. Kita bias mati karna kelaparan bukan karna corona. Karena pemerintah tidak memberikan sembako ato apapun.

#### **Chapter 4: Women Who Listen: Producing Empathy, Achieving Mobility**

Are men the main audience of dangdut? As discussed in Chapter 2, at live concerts, this is indeed the case. Similarly, ideologies of gender and the music industry hold that men must be the main force in production and management of such an erotically-tinged music. I argue that neither is fully true of dangdut koplo. Women are active in dangdut koplo as producers, tastemakers, television hosts, managers, MCs, radio personalities and curators, and as fans—not just singers. Women participate in the industry with two main goals: as fans who are moved by the music, and as constitutors of the genre who seek to make a career from their involvement in the music. This phenomenon counters the belief that men are the main audience for dangdut, as well as the most powerful producers. Women—housewives, fan club members, managers, and producers—are creative and productive tastemakers. Yet social disapproval surrounding their public participation and the eroticism of the music places limits on how and when they listen, which in turn creates tension between dangdut made for television, with women listening in at least equal numbers to men, and dangdut at clubs and celebrations.

In this chapter and the next, I discuss how women shape dangdut koplo beyond the role of singer. This chapter focuses on women who listen as fans, echoing Nina Sun Eidsheim's argument that "to focus analytically on the listener allows us to read and interrogate the impact of a piece of music as it is experienced by a listener who is encultured in a given way" (2015b:5). Practices of listening to and enjoying dangdut koplo are gendered by social sanctions and media systems. I argue that gendered disapproval of women's leisure participation, fandom, and presence at public events

causes women to be more likely to center their fandom on dangdut singing competition television. While men describe listening to dangdut in order to dance and let go of their troubles, women usually express their fandom in the confines of their own homes or in single-gender or otherwise “safe” situations, rarely dancing. As a result, I argue that dangdut television appeals to different emotions and offers different pleasures to women, which in turn shapes gendered and culturally appropriate expectations about music participation. I also investigate women who participate more actively in dangdut fan clubs. Because of their gender, women in fan clubs are granted special access to singers, often serving as assistants to singers and liaisons between singers, band, and management. Fandom, for them, is both social and a career opportunity. However, this special access does not counter, but rather parallels the social disapproval against women spending too much time in leisure activities outside of their homes. The labor expectations connected to their fandom are thus not a privilege, but a reflection of their otherness, their lack of access to pleasure for its own sake.

### **Gender Discrimination, Public Space, and Leisure**

In Chapter 1, I outlined how gender discrimination, long established in Java, creates a tenuous balancing act for singers, who must balance their performance of the ritual role of Dewi Sri with the archetypal requirements of modern, secular superstar, pious Muslimah, and devoted wife and mother. Women who are not singers also face gendered social sanctions and surveillance; however, scholars of Java have frequently debated their relative impact. Many scholars note women’s power in the home, especially over finances, and in the market. Ethnographers have long observed that women

dominate the marketplace (Raffles [1857] 1965:353) and often inherit equal property with their male siblings, which they continue to own separately after marriage (H. Geertz 1961). Brenner points out that women are often, in fact, the primary breadwinners (1995:24) in addition to managing the household finances. However, as Tickamyer and Kusujiarti point out, assuming that economic power is equal to actual power may be misguided in the Javanese case, and many older studies “[overemphasized] Javanese women’s autonomy in the economic sphere without balancing description and analysis of the existence of a patriarchal ideology promoted by the state, religious practice, and cultural values” (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti 2012:34). This begs the question: what are Javanese men doing with their time? As I point out in Chapter 1, men have greater access to leisure and social life than women in Java. It is in that realm that Javanese patriarchy shows strongest. In fact, the seeming disdain Brenner records towards men staying home all day, whistling to their songbirds, may not be reflected in Javanese attitudes toward that behavior. If hard work and pursuit of money and security are seen as behaviors that weaken spiritual potency, as Keeler (1990) and Tickamyer and Kusujiarti (2012) argue, women suffer doubly: first, for laboring harder than men; and second, for being seen as less powerful, rather than more powerful, as a result.

Men control spaces of leisure and movement. This is not a new, though urban space certainly exacerbates problems of women’s access. Sherry Ortner points out that many—even all—societies associate women with domestic rather than public space. Even when women are powerful and present in business or government, “overarching ideology and deeper assumptions of the culture [...] render such power trivial” (In

Landes 1998:23). Shilpa Ranade studied public spaces in Mumbai, drawing on foundational urban studies theorists (Harvey 1990; LeFebvre 1991; Soja 1989), and found that “Even in areas considered to be safe, non-threatening and generally gender-balanced in public perception, the ratio of men to women is glaringly lopsided” (Ranade 2007:1520). While Ranada frequently found men “occupying public space at rest” (1521), sitting on or hanging out near low walls, standing near shops, etc., women moved through public space deliberately and quickly from point to point with purpose. She found, “women can access public space legitimately only when they can manufacture a sense of purpose for being there” (ibid). Women who were biologically productive and potentially sexually active—arguably the years of most passionate potential fandom—were most restricted in their use of public space.

Visitors to Java would find similar behavior, likewise based in anxieties about control of sexually mature young women. Women of sexually productive age are closely surveilled by parents, neighbors, and friends. Sharyn Graham Davies writes that young women’s sexual activity carries the shame of the entire family. Similarly, sexually active single women are seen as poor, unproductive workers, who open their employers to negative outside influence (Davies 2014:33–34). For this reason, the 2010 Indonesian Policewoman’s Handbook specifies that unmarried candidates are subject to inspection to ensure an intact hymen before being accepted to the force. Parents, employers, and even the nation guard young women’s sexual purity with a fervor that goes beyond religion. In contrast, young men face no such pressure. One young man in Yogyakarta told me, “I



only want sons. I would never want a daughter. You have to guard and protect daughters, because they carry the shame [I. *malu*] of the family.”

Davies theorizes this added observation and pressure on young women as a kind of social surveillance, defined as “a regulatory mechanism that is concomitantly constraining and productive” (2014:30). In much of Indonesia, this surveillance does not rely on cameras, but rather on biopower: primarily family members, neighbors, friends, and teachers watching and guarding young women. Linguistically, this is expressed as *titip*, to entrust or temporarily deposit something. Parents or husband might *nitip* (*menitip*) their daughter or wife to a relative, school teacher, *ibu kos*, landlord, etc. For many women in many contexts, surveillance means safety. Young women stick together, travel together, move together as biopower witnesses that help alleviate the danger of shame [I. *malu*]. Davies writes, “people think about surveillance as care, as someone watching over them, looking out for them, protecting them. People may talk about feeling safe because family members are monitoring their movements and actions, because neighbors can see and hear them” (2014:29). In other contexts, surveillance threatens shame. Davies explains, “people may talk about feeling watched, trapped, and imprisoned through the gaze of others, feeling they are unable to express themselves for fear of reprisals” (2014:29). From this we can see how women’s relative economic power is rendered trivial by broader discrimination against their bodies as carrying the potential for shame, and the surveillance which arises under the guise of protection.

Social sanctions against women, especially young women, are further codified by putting practical limits on their freedom of movement. Limits in their leisure activity

stem from anxieties about sexual promiscuity and are enacted by societal rules and surveillance—strict curfew rules applied to most Javanese young women by their parents or the owners of their boarding houses [I. *kos*]<sup>32</sup>, for example. At many *kos* for young women, the owner locks residents either in or out, depending on their position, at 10pm, by locking the outer gate, to which most young women are not given keys. If a young woman wants to get back inside, she must call the owner or security guard and deal with the shame of making an excuse. Most concerts have not yet finished at that time; many have hardly begun. Many women musicians who live in *kos* make arrangements to stay with friends if they know they will have to stay out late in order to sidestep the issue entirely. In contrast, men rarely have to explain where they go or what they do to their Bapak or Ibu *kos*.

This puts strict limits on the ability women have to express fandom. As Luvaas comments, “Women out too late at night are liable to be accused of being *nakal* (naughty, indecent, immoral) or worse, *kupu-kupu malam* (night butterflies, that is, prostitutes). They [exercise] a strict self-censorship, going home earlier than their male counterparts so as not to arouse suspicion” (Luvaas 2012:75). As I will discuss later, this same kind of self-censorship, a different manner of experiencing leisure that cuts women off from fully engrossing, pleasurable experiences, figures heavily in dangdut fandom as well.

#### Dangdut Concerts in Public Space and Women’s Bodies

As a result of the social pressure described above, the atmosphere of off-air dangdut concerts is widely considered unsafe for young women. Young men usually take

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<sup>32</sup> As René Lysloff brought to my attention, *kos* is likely an abbreviation of *indekos*, likely from Dutch.

most of the physical space close to the stage, partly because their number and enthusiasm is one way to measure the success of the event. They drink alcohol, dance wildly, and fight each other in a flowing mass of bodies, seemingly only tempered by the tempo of the music and the presence of police. Women avoid this part of the space. Women seem to instinctively know which dangdut sites are safe and which are not. When they do not feel safe, they fall to the back of the crowd, clustering together, not dancing. When they feel safe, such as when there is a designated section for women, daylight, and security guards with clear sight lines, they join in the crowd with their friends, laughing, dancing and even giving *saweran* to the singer (Figure 53).



*Figure 53: A group of dangdut fans—both men and women—dance together openly at a Stasiun Dangdut live taping event in a Surabaya mall, April 2018. Surrounded by security and cameras and among friends, women feel confident enough to dance and do so eagerly. Photo by the author.*

When men explain why they drink alcohol at dangdut performances, or why fistfights happen, they often say that they want to “fly,” using the English word. “Fly” is here an emotional term rather than a physical one, explained to me as encompassing emotional and physical states ranging from freedom from stress and negative emotion, to freedom from inhibitions, as well as a hypnotized, possessed state like someone experiencing a strong stimulant. At the same time, it’s an overstatement to claim that men have a fully safe experience at these concerts or that they are not aware of their surroundings. In fact, one third of dangdut fans that I surveyed,<sup>33</sup> regardless of gender, responded that they’d felt unsafe at a dangdut concert. Most usually responded that fistfights, knifings, substance abuse, and pickpockets were their main source of anxiety. However, only women told me that they avoided going because of that fear. Women rarely get the opportunity to even desire to fly, they must so rigidly guard their bodies and reputations. Not only does social pressure constrain where their bodies can go and how they can behave; women also begin to self-censor, to stay at home.

### **Women Watching Television**

#### **Dangdut Singing Competition Television**

Most women do not travel to attend dangdut concerts. Instead, they listen and watch from afar through mass media. Whereas outdoor concerts are the realm of men, dangdut singing competition television shows possess a much more women-based

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<sup>33</sup> For preliminary research among fans, I posted a short online survey on my social media account asking about listening practices and preferences. Nanang, a prominent fan club member for OM Monata, helped me word my questions appropriately and shared the survey link with fan club members. I received fifty-six responses, eleven of which were from women.

viewership, with reports ranging from an even split (*seimbang*, or balanced, as Gita, the producer of the show *Stasiun Dangdut* told me) or woman-dominated; as the saying goes, dangdut competition shows are for *pembantu* (domestic workers) and *ibu-ibu* (housewives). Perhaps a little facetiously, I might define dangdut singing competition television as women's music; as Eileen Hayes writes, "more integral to the definition of women's music than music style is the primacy of women in women's lives" (2010:79). Women fans watching women singers on television shows produced by women—of course, I am leaving out most bands and camerapersons, as well as many composers and part of the audience, but I raise the point to provoke.

As I have written in the Introduction and elsewhere<sup>34</sup>, dangdut shows are among the most popular television in Indonesia. On the Indosiar channel alone, dangdut takes up the prime-time slot from 6 pm until midnight nearly every night. Dangdut was not always accepted on television. Rhoma Irama, the father of classic dangdut, was banned from the national television station, TVRI, from 1977 to 1988, because it was thought the social ills addressed in his songs, like poverty and drunkenness, would destabilize audiences (see Hobart and Fox 2008). As dangdut increased in popularity and esteem, the government-run channels slowly recognized the potential dangdut held for both profit and satiating the masses.<sup>35</sup> In the 1990s, private television began to increase in visibility and make up a greater percentage of the market as both the economy and the power of

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<sup>34</sup> An earlier version of this section about dangdut television history appeared in the article below:  
Decker, Andrea. 2020. "Hidden for Their Protection: Gendered Power, Provocation, and Representation in Dangdut Competition Television." *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 176(1): 37–69. doi:[10.1163/22134379-17601002](https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17601002).

<sup>35</sup> See Weintraub 2010 for a thorough discussion of dangdut television history.

consumers grew. These early shows took a variety of formats, from music videos to dangdut dramas to soap operas in which the characters would break out into dangdut songs to make their emotional point. Women singers, dressed in glamorous ballgowns, began to dominate the television stage.

TPI, now called MNC or MNCTV, was the first channel to produce a dangdut singing-competition show in 2005, following in the steps of the newly popular television format (*American Idol* began three years earlier, *Pop idol* four years earlier). In dangdut singing competitions, producers saw a new opportunity for boosting the prestige of dangdut among the middle class while still catering to the tastes of the majority. A singing-competition show must focus on singing, rather than on drumbeats or dance moves. They could bring dangdut out of the club, out of Pantura, and onto the national stage. However, aspects of the music and performance would have to be downplayed or changed to fit the television medium and middle-class tastes.

These television shows deliberately cater to women because women generally control household finances throughout much of Java.<sup>36</sup> As stated above, whether financial control is a sign of empowerment or social inferiority (i.e., men are too refined to deal with crass money matters), has been a topic of debate among anthropologists (including Benedict Anderson, Ward Keeler, and Suzanne Brenner). Regardless, advertisers want producers to deliver women as a viewing audience. From finding male contestants who are “masculine enough,” to segments on fashion and celebrity, producers constantly change show elements to better appeal to what they think women want. Women are

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<sup>36</sup> For more information, see Chapter 5, where I discuss producers’ views of fans and audiences.

aware of the power they hold over show content; they vote for contestants, post on social media, and vocalize their opinions.

### Dangdut Fans in Private Spaces

Hikmah teaches midwifery at a small university in Surabaya. She plays with the university gamelan ensemble, mainly made up of faculty hobbyists. She loves music. She's also passionate about health science and peppers me with all kinds of questions about midwifery in the United States. When I tell her that I study dangdut, she lights up. "Do you watch *Liga Dangdut*?" She asks. "Of course," I respond.

*Liga Dangdut* is one of several dangdut singing competition show on the channel Indosiar. When we spoke, in Spring 2018, it was in its very first season. Like all Indosiar's dangdut competition shows, it ran between five and seven hours every evening, with an elaborate, wayang kulit-like four act structure ending often at one in the morning. *Liga Dangdut* takes one contestant from every province in Indonesia and pits them against each other to find one winner, a triumph of unity in diversity.

"Who do you support?" I ask.

"Arif!" She exclaims.

At this moment Hikmah and I bond over our shared support for Arif. From that day forward, every night Arif sang she would text me. "Arif will be on segment two! And he's duetting with Reza!" When Arif was cut—he received third place in the end—she vented to me about the corruption among the judges, about how they wouldn't give him a fair chance because he was blind. "Who cares that he can't do the same choreography Rara and Selfi can?" she asked, clearly frustrated. We would share social media posts,

listen together to Arif's performance highlights, and text each other our passionate responses.

Despite this shared passion, we never watched the full show together. She never invited me to her home, and she politely declined my invitations. In fact, though I often found men watching Indosiar late at night in semi-public places—neighborhood security posts or coffee shops, and I once watched half an episode with two employees folding napkins in an empty restaurant—most women seemed to watch in their own homes while dozing in and out. When I did have the opportunity to watch with women, their conversation about their aesthetic preferences and emotional reactions was minimal. That is not to say that they did not have those reactions, however; I was taken off guard more than once when a fellow viewer would suddenly change the channel in frustration. Yet, despite the lack in open conversation, there was still a social aspect to watching, I thought as Hikmah texted me late one night to alert me that Arif's segment was coming up. I knew that somewhere she was watching too, and that we were both swaying softly to the drumbeat, gasping at Arif's high notes, moved by the tragedy of the lyrics as he cried out to God asking why human beings could be so cruel in the song "You are like the Moon" [I. "*Enkau Laksana Bulan*"].

#### Television and Embodied Difference

One main reason men listen to dangdut is so they can dance, and they dance to release anxiety and negative emotions. When interviewed, men were without exception prepared with this response, as though narratives about dangdut's power and men's susceptibility to it had been accepted into common discourse. If women like Hikmah



watch dangdut television and listen to recordings online, usually without dancing, what is their goal? What do they enjoy about the music? When asked, women respond that they like the familial associations—a stark difference from the narratives of emotional release propagated by men. Women learn to watch television from older women in their family, who always turn on competition shows in the evening. When women karaoke with friends, there's always dangdut. Women were less likely to articulate a reason for enjoying the music that was tied to the sound itself or the movement it promotes. Instead they turn to social reinforcement to explain—or justify—the pleasure they find in the music. When I pressed them specifically about dangdut's power, many women would laugh and acknowledge that dangdut possesses a special power to pull people in. The narrative about men's susceptibility has reached the level of public discourse, but women's experiences of dangdut are somewhat less often articulated.

From participant observation both in person and on social media, I conclude that there are several components to the pleasure women experience while watching dangdut shows. First is the pleasure in dangdut's pulsing rhythm itself, which draws in the body. However, as women rarely express this pleasure in dance, I identify several other factors. The powerful voices and tragic stories relayed in the songs move them to strong emotion, empathy for the characters in the stories as well as a kinesthetic passion felt from the bodies of singers even through the television screen. Finally, women take pleasure in enacting fandom and participating in public discourse. Dangdut television provides an outlet for political discourse and opinion; what singers they like, what judges and MCs are entertaining, what elements of the contest are fair or unfair.

I argue that empathy, both in the narratives of the often mournful song lyrics and in kinesthetic sympathy with the singers' open throat and "weepy" technique, is central to dangdut television's power to draw on emotion and create public discourse. The melancholy lyrics and overwhelming emotions portrayed by the singer make women feel heard, represented, and even empowered. To make this argument, I draw on affect theory, most notably Sara Ahmed's argument that societal concepts about emotion constitute personhood—that "it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made" (2014:10)—as well as Susan Leigh Foster's writing about empathy and kinesthesia as tools for dance research (2011).

Several scholars have formed their own interpretations about how the interplay between melancholy lyrics and dance rhythms creates a pleasurable bodily response. Bettina David writes, "I believe that the pleasures (or 'dangers') of *dangdut* performances derive precisely from these contrasting levels of signification enacted in performance by the typically female singer and the predominantly male dancing audience: the interplay of the rational, verbal dimension of the song lyrics and the corporeal-rhythmic dimension of non-verbal sensuality" (David 2003:250-251). Andrew Weintraub likewise argues that dangdut is an "undomesticated space" that emphasizes "playfulness, spontaneity, and passion" because of its contradictions (Weintraub 2010:146).

I argue that the supposedly automatic responses to dangdut's allure are in fact deeply gendered. Women who are barred from dancing, or even feel the slightest gendered discouragement from dancing, cannot be said to have the same conditioned response to the music. Rather than be carried away into dancing, women allow

themselves to be carried away by empathy for the characters in the stories. This empathy incorporates and reflects both the melancholy lyrics and the anguish in the voice. It is a physical response. Empathy, targeted outwards at the subject of lyrics, combined with social media participation and the ability to vote and express opinions about outcomes, serves to connect women with their friends and with public discourse from the privacy of their homes.

#### Affect Theory and Javanese Women

Empathy is by its nature affective, and so must be explored from the perspective of affect theory as well as psychology and philosophy. Remarkably, affect theorists point to similar distinctions between body and mind. As Sara Ahmed recognizes, while Descartes and David Hume see emotions as a bodily reaction, Aristotle, Sartre, and others place emotions in the cognitive response—judgements and appraisals—which follow physical stimuli. Ahmed herself poses a reinvestigation of the relationship between emotion, cognition, and the body, arguing that “emotions are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects” (Ahmed 2014:7). In other words, contact with something may spark an emotion, but that emotion is already somewhat determined by the subject’s orientation towards that thing. Emotions are, then, relational, and much of our relational associations are shaped by sociality.

The idea that emotions are, by and large, socially conditioned fits perfectly with high Javanese views of emotion. As children grow, parents emphasize controlling shows of emotion as a central tenant of their growth. Controlling emotion is a sign of being civilized [I. *berperadaban*], while hot, raging passions are viewed as crude [I. *kasar*] and

even animal-like. Even stereotypically low and passionate dangdut songs reflect these beliefs, with the ideal romantic partner not being passionate or devoted, but rather cool [J. *adem*] and cautious [In East Javanese slang, *selow* or *woles*]. Extreme shows of emotion are considered embarrassing, a potential cause of shame and discomfort [I. *malu*, or J. *éwuh*, *pakéwuh*].

This emphasis on the cooling of emotions, or at least shows of emotion, is striking when compared with the deliberate empathy plays of dangdut television—or indeed of much pop culture targeting women, notably including *sinetron*, or Indonesian soap operas, as well. However, if we accept that emotions are conditioned not only on the basis of the object of the emotion itself, but on the context as well, the function of dangdut television (and dangdut concerts) begins to come into focus. As Weintraub, Wallach, Spiller, and other scholars have shown, men attend dangdut concerts because of “irresistible, euphoria-inducing sensual pleasures” and the “powerful social leveling effects” those pleasure induce (Wallach 2014:278) Dangdut television may work much the same way, with one important difference: at concerts, at least for men, part of the release comes from dancing. David (2014) argued that the pleasure of dangdut derived from the contrasting signification that arises between the mournful lyrics and the pleasure of dancing. Women, both watching television and at concerts, rarely dance, and usually do so cautiously. They take pleasure in the music and release emotion a different way.

#### *Baper*: To Be Moved

Emotions are after all moving, even if they do not simply move between us. We should note that the word ‘emotion’ comes from the Latin, *emovere*, referring to ‘to move, to move out’. Of course, emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that. The

relationship between movement and attachment is instructive. What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the ‘where’ of its inhabitation, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others.  
(Ahmed 2014:11)

In the case of dangdut television, this overwhelming affective response to the music and narrative is often referred to as *baper*. Dangdut fans, but especially women, describe how the music enables them to *baper*, to feel deeply. *Baper* is a slang [I. *bahasa gaul*] *singkatan*, or abbreviation, from *bawa perasaan*, which loosely means to be carried off in emotion or overcome by emotion, or, alternatively, to bring too much emotion to a situation. As referenced by Sara Ahmed above, the metaphor of movement for emotion is present in English as well as Indonesian. While in English the connotation is usually positive, in Indonesian *baper* is often used negatively, to complain of someone who is overreacting to something. “*Jangan baper,*” people will say to the person who is overwrought, “Don’t get so emotional.” In this context, *baper* echoes the type of tone policing that discriminates against women, who are seen as strident or too emotional, and people of color, who are seen as angry or whiney for expressing grievances, in the United States context. *Baper* can likewise perform the labor of silencing people with genuine grievances. However, *baper* has another, more positive context as well. *Baper* can refer to the power of music and drama to carry the viewer or listener away to a different emotional state. Netizens post videos of emotional dangdut ballads with the caption “*vidio ini bikin baper*” (this video will make you *baper*) “*suara yang bikin baper*” (a voice that makes you *baper*) or similar statements advertising the power of the video or the voice to create a strong emotion. Although men often admit to *baper*, especially in the

context of classic or “nostalgic” dangdut songs, *baper* takes on a gendered identity. As one YouTube commenter writes about the Via Vallen song “Baper,” “wanita itu mudah baper. jd jgn sampe wanita itu baper dgn hal yg gk jls” (women *baper* easily, so, women, make sure you don’t *baper* over something that isn’t clear). Even in the realm of the emotive, men are credited with logical reasons for being emotional, while women are warned not to get too emotional without a reason—and what constitutes a “good” or “clear” reason is left to the judgement of men.

#### How is Affect Created in Dangdut Television?

Dangdut television relies on and generates affects of melancholy and pleasure via several deliberate techniques. Preeminent among them are song lyrics, which often tell tales of heartbreak, abuse, and sacrifice. The voice itself is another component, which, in contrast to the clear, speech-like technique common for singers of off-air dangdut koplo, often involves some slight tension in the throat akin to the feeling of a primal sob. Finally, producers, MCs, and judges produce affect through the use of “gimmicks,” intentionally staged situations involving personalities on the show and their relationships to each other, their struggles before the show, and even their relationships with their families. The production of affect in dangdut television, and its position as the main public discourse for many housewives, defines what types of people, bodies, and situations are deserving of empathy.

The main stage lights are down as the first notes of “Payung Hitam” sound out, but the studio audience shouts, whistles, and claps. Sidelights, flashing through smoke, give way to a dull light revealing Lesti at stage center. Only fifteen years old, Lesti wears

a knee-length black dress, her thick bangs and messy updo reminiscent of a young girl’s first big party or school dance. She looks downcast and perfectly still as an electric guitar picks a mournful melody. A short silence falls. Lesti swallows, inhales through her nose, raises the microphone to her lips, and turns slightly to gaze into the center of the audience before closing her eyes. Then Lesti cries out the introduction, a short piece of text, but florid and meterless, reminiscent of the *bawa* of *karawitan*:

<i>Bagai bencana</i>	Like a disaster
<i>Yang melanda</i>	Which struck
<i>Setelah ku dengar</i>	After I heard
<i>Keputusanmu kejam</i>	Your cruel decision

Her voice begins in a howl. The force of her breath on “bagai” creates so much pressure that her lips pop the mic on the plosive “b.” The note is forceful, carried deep from her chest. The studio audience immediately responds with applause and cheers. When she nears the point of needing to release the tone her jaw begins to tremble. She squeezes her throat as she releases, creating a groan as she pronounces the [i] vowel. She inhales in a quick gasp, deliberately imitating the sensation of sobbing, before singing the next note: “bencana.” She begins equally forcefully, bouncing off the [tʃ] (“ch”) sound, the “ah” pushing from her belly, through her wide mouth, before turning into a nasal whimper, choked off at the end. “Yang” oscillates between two lower notes, quieter and infused with a breathy quality, before “melanda” rises again, higher but still quiet. The audience applauds and cheers again as she releases. On “setelah,” she hesitates to land again into a

howl, employing a timid *cengkok* [E. melisma] before releasing the breath fully on “lah.” Then on “ku dengar,” her voice is quiet but no less intense, the “ku” sliding back and forth between two neighbor notes as though refusing to land. She releases into “dengar,” her throat squeezing to create *cengkok* that sound like the tightness that comes from crying. Another swallow, a short gaspy breath, and she sings “keputusanmu” quietly and mournfully, the “ke” and “pu” stretched out with florid *cengkok* that oscillate between two notes before suddenly jumping up to a higher one, only to descend again. Unlike the reedier, speech-like technique of many dangdut koplo singers and the lighter, clear flexibility of klasik singers like Elvy Sukaesih, Lesti’s voice, while flexible with forward resonance, has a cover over it, as though some part of the nasopharyngeal passageway is tightening. The sound is much like a sob, especially on held-out notes. Her brow furrows intensely and she reaches out to the audience, shoulders bent forward as though she’s suffered a wound. The final word, cruel [I. *kejam*], is whispered with resigned desperation, a sudden child-like sound in comparison with the earlier howl. The entire introduction takes almost two minutes.

The guitar plays a smooth riff and the kendang drum enters, establishing a firm, grooving pulse as Lesti sings the first few lines of the song, a low guttural melody broken up by near constant *cengkok*. On the word “wait” [I. *menanti*], her voice begins to rise again, and as she sings “I don’t care that the rain falls/Lighting tries to deter me,” her voice is firm and full, largely free from melisma until “menghalangi,” [I. *deter*], on which her voice suddenly descends in a rapid cascade of notes. “I hold on” is firm, but the last line of the verse descends again, “membasahi” floridly imitating the raindrops that wet



her body. The next verse repeats the same melody, the first two lines low, hesitant, heartbroken, moving higher and stronger with less melisma as she asks, “Why only now do you compare me/with this woman you’ve just started to love?” Instead of descending again, Lesti’s voice grows again into a wail on the word “cruel.”

<i>Payung hitam yang menjadi saksi</i>	The black umbrella that served as witness
<i>Setiap hari diriku menanti</i>	Every day I wait alone
<i>Tak peduli hujan turun</i>	I don't care that the rain falls
<i>Petir menghalangi</i>	Lightning tries to deter me
<i>Ku tetap bertahan</i>	I hold on
<i>Walau air hujan membasahi badan</i>	Even though the rain drenches my body
<i>Tapi kini setelah engkau kembali</i>	But now, after you return
<i>Sikap sungguh menyakitkan hati</i>	Your countenance breaks my heart
<i>Mengapa baru sekarang</i>	Why only now
<i>Aku kau banding-bandingkan</i>	Do you compare me
<i>Dengan wanita</i>	With this woman
<i>Yang baru kau cinta</i>	You've just started to love
<i>Kejam....</i>	Cruel...

The lyrics tell a tale of abject powerlessness, a woman whose only recourse in a bad relationship is to wait for the man's decision and take pride in her ability to hold on [*"ku tetap bertahan"*]. The man's choice hits like a disaster [*bencana*], a lightning strike, as much the fault of fate as the fault of the man. She mourns the injustice but has no power to change it. When performed on the dangdut koplo off-air circuit, the singer would

dance gently during the instrumental interlude. Lesti does not. Instead, she slowly walks to the front of the stage, eyes downcast.

During the bridge, she laments the man's power, "How easily you decided the fate of our love, just with one word: sorry" [I. "Sungguh begitu mudahnya/kau memutuskan cinta/hanya dengan satu kata/kata maaf saja"]. Each of the first two melodic phrases start in a higher register and descend in stepwise motion, a slow slide downward like a sob. As she sings "just with one word," she is declarative, increasing in accusatory power. On the word "sorry," she jumps again to a higher pitch, an indignant, furious wail, loud and strong. The audience bursts again into applause and shouting. Her bitterness towards fate leaves her with only her emotions, overwhelming and all-consuming, as power, the true witness to the man's cruelty (rather than the umbrella), as towards the end, after a climactic moment, she cries quietly, "Were women born to this world only to become objects for men to compare?" [I. "Apakah seorang wanita/lahir ke dunia/hanya untuk dijadikan/bahan perbandingan?"].

Originally sung by Iis Dahlia, "Payung Hitam" is famous for its powerful emotive quality and the difficulty of the *cengkok*, dangdut melisma, required to perform it properly. As a result, it's frequently one of the required audition songs for participants on Indosiar's competition shows. In Lesti's case, "Payung Hitam" helped her clinch the momentum she would need to win Dangdut Academy Season One a few weeks later. To this day, Lesti is probably the most famous singer to come out of Dangdut Academy because of her ability to embody grief and tragedy; as one macho-looking man in the

lumber industry put it when I asked him about his favorite singers on competition television, her voice could instantly make a man weep.

### Emotional Bodies

As previously mentioned, Bettina David argues that the pleasure of dangdut derives from the contrasting signification that arises between the mournful lyrics and the pleasure of dancing, the “the interplay of the rational, verbal dimension of the song lyrics and the corporeal-rhythmic dimension of non-verbal sensuality (David 2014:251). For David, this ambiguity lends itself to a leveling, inclusive function within dangdut, a phenomenon Jeremy Wallach also discusses, arguing that dangdut concerts are utopian in their unifying erasure of class boundaries (2014). While I question this argument—as I argue in Chapters 1 and 2 and later in this chapter, dangdut concerts are strictly hierarchical and reify as many social power relationships as they problematize—I acknowledge the pleasure in the interplay between mournful lyrics, the pulsing drumbeat, and the positive social reinforcement of dancing together. However, I must ask, what, then, is the pleasure of listening to mournful dangdut on television without dancing? How do the women who watch feel and embody this other kind of pleasure?

In the following section, I outline two broad categories of empathetic experience for women watching and listening to dangdut television. The first is the narrative: the song texts themselves, the singer’s textual delivery, the narrative power of broadcast media, and gimmicks. Producers, MCs, performers, and viewers use the English word gimmick to refer to staged reality television-style empathy plays performed by MCs, jury members (dangdut celebrities whose antics are the main attraction of these shows),

contestants, and their families to make the show dramatic [I. *bikin dramatis*], funny, or emotional. The second empathetic experience is kinesthetic, involving the movement of the body, physical responses to the music itself, and the shared sensations across bodies—in other words, the ability of listeners to kinesthetically sense the physicality of the singer's emotive state and the vibration produced by the other body. Both narrative and kinesthetic factors may serve as an impetus for an empathetic response. The two types are not wholly separate, nor do they feel separate in the experience of the listener; indeed, narrative and kinesthetic responses reinforce each other, together creating the circumstances in which being moved by emotion is acceptable.

### Sensing Weeping Voices

When asked what causes them to be emotionally moved by a performance, most people responded that the voice of a singer carried the most power. Certainly, lyrics themselves must be part of this equation, as the story being told and its poetic potential influence the emotions of both performer and listener. Yet both women and men indicated that something about the voice itself impacts the degree to which the emotion is felt. Singers like Selfi, the winner of *Liga Dangdut* Season 1, who are technically proficient, were not necessarily known for causing strong emotions. Lesti, mentioned above, is famous for creating emotion through her tone. In this section, I argue for an interpretation of dangdut music on television that looks beyond music as object—sound or text—and instead explores the resonances and layers of meaning created between singers and audience. Drawing from sound studies and recent critical work on the voice, I show how the singer and listener are co-constitutive, and that a singer's emotional state

and “imaginative empathy” (Abe 2018:31) are sensed by audience members, even through their television sets or smartphones, in a sensory experience that cannot be reduced to sound and sight alone. I follow Judith Becker (2004), Nina Sun Eidsheim, and others in arguing that, although neuroscience can tell us how the brain processes kinesthesia and other senses as well as emotion and empathy, a humanistic framework resists separating the components of the lived experience, and can thus provide unique insights, acknowledging that this contribution to the field of voice studies is full of “productive dilemmas, irresolutions, and suspensions” (Eidsheim and Meizel 2019:xxvii). From Lesti’s performance, the audience’s response, the reported responses of others who experienced it, and my own experience sensing the performance, I argue that an exploration of lyrics and sounds, attention to pitch and story, is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon of *baper* in dangdut television performance. I also echo Eidsheim’s orientation towards feminist philosophy on the materiality of the body both to treat women’s sensing and musicking as deserving of study and to show the “physical and sensory properties of singers’ and listeners’ bodies; on the spaces and materials in which sound disperses; and on these aspects’ collective indispensability to singing and listening as experiences” (Eidsheim 2015a:105).

I follow Eidsheim in imagining a voice beyond sound. Referencing Geertz, Eidsheim argues that thick description requires attending to more than one physical sense. She calls the tendency to reduce sound to previously defined referents like pitch, duration, lyrics, or other (relatively) easily transcribable or describable categories “figures of sound” (2015b:2). Rather than attending to those readily accepted categories,

she understands singing and listening as “intermaterial vibrational practices,” and argues that “not only aurality but also tactile, spatial, physical, material, and vibrational sensations are at the core of all music” (2015b:8). She argues, “By maintaining that voice, listening, sound, and music are necessarily multisensory phenomena, and by grounding my investigation in pedagogical practices—in singing and listening bodies” (Eidsheim 2015b:3). Resonance provides another way of thinking about the vibration passed between bodies in the practice of sensing music. Marié Abe writes, “in resonance, listeners and practitioners empathetically embody sensibilities and sentiments that others might be experiencing, or reimagine certain historical moments, both the past and future” (Abe 2018:103). Veit Erlmann further contends that resonance is useful for questioning “the binary of the materiality of things and the immateriality of signs that has been at the center of Western thought for much of the modern ear” (Erlmann 2015:181). Attending to the vibrations and resonances between bodies requires two things, which I have attempted to accomplish in the above example of Lesti’s performance: listener experience and accounts and thick description of sensation. Influenced by Eidsheim and Meizel, I do so in the name of “understanding voice’s role in how human connections are forged” (2019:xxvii).

Kinesthesia is another way scholars have explored the sensations of performance. Often defined as a type of sixth sense, kinesthesia is an individual’s ability to perceive the boundaries and interior sensations of their own body. Arts educators often tout kinesthesia as a valuable tool for learning music and dance techniques. While neurological evidence for kinesthesia remains limited, philosophers and

phenomenologists recognize that many human beings claim to some degree to be able to sense others' feelings and movements. As Susan Leigh Foster writes, "often derided or dismissed within the academy, kinesthesia and the information it might provide have typically been received with skepticism at best. Pervasive mistrust of the body and the classification of its information as either sexual, unknowable, or indecipherable" (Foster 2011:7) might be part of the reason. Foster argues for a connection between empathy and kinesthesia, and, as a result, a conceptualization of empathy not as an emotion, but "a changing sense of physicality that, in turn, [influences] how one felt another's feelings (Foster 2011:11). In this imagining of kinesthesia, one body takes in or senses the emotions and movement patterns of another body. In Foster's words, "Empathy [...] became a process through which one experienced muscularly as well as psychically the dynamics of what was being witnessed" (Foster 2011:177).

Yet Foster also challenges the idea that kinesthetic connection is somehow natural or unmediated. Cultural knowledge and conditioning has an impact on kinesthetic responses, and the very claims for embodied empathy and kinesthesia betray socially constructed beliefs about the body. Perhaps most dangerously, claims of embodied empathy create a division between the two bodies, one sensing and one sensed. This division uncomfortably parallels patterns of scholarship in anthropology, ethnomusicology, and even dance studies in which a normatively rational, white, male scholar observes and interprets the bodies of marked Others, who are sensed instead of sensing. It also creates an implied argument about what types of bodies and conditions are deserving or needing of empathy. I will return to this below.



Like Nina Sun Eidsheim, my orientation towards voices and listening comes from training in classical singing, which takes as a given that the resonances and vibrations sensed between teacher and student are useful for both learning and diagnostics. The idea that students of western classical singing, for example, can use kinesthesia to sense good vocal technique, or that their teachers can use kinesthesia to diagnose and treat technical faults, is so fundamental to the practice as to be assumed. James C. McKinney writes in a pedagogy book used by training programs across the world, “One of the most effective techniques used in analyzing the cause of a particular fault is to empathize with the student—to try to feel in your own vocal mechanism the actions that are taking place in his—to enter so completely into what he is doing that your own mechanism subconsciously attempts to reproduce his vocal production” (McKinney 1994:18). Although the ideologies driving this manner of corrective teaching reinforce top-down disciplines on the bodies of students, teachers of singing inherently understand what many scholars forget: the sound is not the only experience of the music. No wonder, then, that I draw from music and dance education’s concepts of kinesthesia to understand how the experience of watching an artistic performance can create empathetic and affective responses. Whatever the physiological or psychological processes at play, and whether training and experience are required or not, it’s clear that musicians sense something happening in their own body as they sense the body of another.

Using this approach to analyze singers, some commonly-held beliefs about the voice come into question. Because voices come from within our bodies and the physiological processes for sounding the voice are largely hidden to the human eye, and

because the voice is often metaphorically used to stand for personhood or power, vocal timbre is often considered to reveal essential characteristics of the body or the person. An approach to the voice that considers resonance and process shows instead that voices are always taking shape in response to situations, objects, and other bodies, as well as training and discipline. Because it resonates with other bodies in multiple ways, it is reconstituted by them. “Because the voice is formed in conjunction with the body, it too broadcasts the social attitudes and values of the trained body” (Eidsheim 2014:339). Eidsheim and Meizel explain that the vocal mechanism is material, “shaped for a particular vocal outcome,” but also dependent on the auditory function, on “hearing or otherwise sensing voice” (Eidsheim and Meizel 2019:xxv), Singers alter and refine their vocal production in response to feedback from their own bodies, their kinesthetic sense, as well as from audiences, or even, as Marié Abe argues, in response to what they believe audiences they cannot see or hear want or will be moved by. Abe calls this “imaginative empathy” (Abe 2018:31) for listeners, a resonance singers feel with imagined others. In singing and sensing voice, then, singers adjust their own vocal tract and bodies in response to the expected forms (Eidsheim and Meizel call this “the prompt”), their own hearing and kinesthetic sense, audience response, and their empathetic sense of audience responses (whether in the room or not).

What happens, then, when a woman watches Lesti perform on dangdut television? While the scholars mentioned above provide compelling evidence for vibration and resonance between bodies in performance, what of sensing music on television? I argue that an orientation towards resonance, vibration, and sensing allows for better

understanding of mass mediated experience. As Eidsheim writes, “vibration provides a route for thinking about fluidity and distribution that does not distinguish between or across media, and a portal for communicating beyond physical boundaries” (Eidsheim 2015b:16). Considering vibration “shows us interconnectedness in material terms” (Eidsheim 2015b:20). While mass mediation may impact the nature of the vibrations and resonances, as they are filtered through recording, broadcasting, and transmitting technologies, it cannot be denied that the vibrations still exist, still are equally real, and are still sensed.

Vibration and resonance are not alone responsible for creating emotion, of course. As Sara Ahmed explains, what human beings register as emotion is simply a sensation of bodily change in response to an object, the “impression” the object leaves upon us and how we interpret that bodily change are largely conditioned by our past experience, what Ahmed calls “the sociality of emotion” (2014:6–9). Narrative comes into play here. The dangdut songs selected for many of Indosiar’s competition programs are melancholy in nature. The grief-stricken lyrics and gimmicks frame and contextualize the resonances felt by the listener’s body, producing empathy for the tragic situation described in the lyrics, reinforced by an embodied response to the singer’s vocal production, until without understanding why, the viewer is swept along in the emotion. The sensation created is “an immediate heartfelt resonance” (Rahaim 2017:188), but, following Matthew Rahaim, I consider how the empathy of unity can also create or resonate with alterity. Who is left out of empathy? How is empathy used to further express and reveal alterity? In the next

section, I consider why producers focus on creating this type of overwrought emotional experience.

### Empathy for Some Bodies

In dangdut television, the previously mentioned gimmicks provide some of the most moving moments. *Gimmick*, the English word, is used by MCs and producers to describe the skits, games, and audience interactions in between music performances. In these gimmicks, the MCs, judges, and contestants performatively enact moving situations, and by doing so demonstrate what kinds of situations and songs are appropriate for *baper*. *Baper* is not just the expression of strong or excessive emotion. Rather, it is a kind of performative empathy. By enacting skits, adding music, and being moved to emotion on the potent stage of national television, the main players of dangdut television demonstrate to their audiences what kinds of people and situations are worthy of empathy—who deserves the viewers' feelings. Their empathy targets mothers, the poor, and the disabled, and empathy can be manufactured in a few ways: demonstration of piety, poverty, illness, and disability. The obviousness of the gimmicks and their manipulative nature frustrates middle-class Indonesians and even many ardent fans of the shows, who call them tacky and excessive, bemoaning in particular the amount of talking and the manipulative emotional tactics. However, the shows maintain their stellar ratings.

The empathetic performance defines what types of people are deserving of empathy and what types are not, with poverty and disability taking center stage as fodder in a tokenizing spectacle of suffering. Middle class educated Indonesians tend to mock these performances of empathy, and often for good reason. Arif, whom Hikmah and I

both favored to win Liga Dangdut Season One, was born blind. He had two siblings, also born blind. Although blind children in Indonesia are viewed by most Indonesians as abject, a number of career and educational options are available to them, e.g., massage therapy and music. From a young age, Arif was trained in music and Qur'anic recitation. The show's MCs heavily emphasized his Islamic piety, more than once testing his knowledge onstage and inviting his religious leaders to testify to his piety.

This was part and parcel with empathy plays, but it was only the beginning. Repeatedly as the competition wore on, Arif's mother and siblings were invited to the stage so the MCs could grill the family for pathos. They asked for details about her struggles raising disabled kids, all her sacrifice and labor, and the performance would not end until at least one jury member was visibly in tears. The children, meanwhile, would stand by passively while the show's participants called them a burden. The song "Muara Kasih Bunda," roughly translated as "Mother is the Fount of Love," has, through repeated use on the show, become indexical to empathy plays. Sometimes called simply "Bunda," the song appears constantly on Indosiar. Originally performed by Erie Susan (also sometimes spelled Suzan), the song describes the selfless work mothers perform for children and the special place mothers hold within Islam. Accompanied by sweeping violin solos, unusual in dangdut, Erie Susan pleads for forgiveness for everything she's done to hurt her mother and asks for her mother's blessing.

"Muara Kasih Bunda" is featured on Indosiar in several different ways. Competitors sometimes sing it as part of the competition. But more often, "Bunda" is featured in the gimmicks for which Indosiar is infamous. In the case of Arif, Arif himself

is not as worthy of empathy as is his mother, who, in the words of the MCs, struggled and sacrificed with the great burden of raising him with his disability. The intent is clear when we look at Arif's contest songs. Rather than singing romantic songs, he chose or was given a series of songs praising his parents, even special compositions called "Ibu" (mother) and "Ayah" (father). These song choices effectively created pathos, but also decentered his personhood, turning him perpetually into a child instead of a full adult and potential lover.<sup>37</sup>

These empathetic performances often move beyond the competition stage into televised soap-opera style dramas starring the dangdut contestants. For example, the series *Kisah Nyata Sang Bintang* (True Tales of a Star) showed supposedly true histories of the show's contestants on their way to stardom. The deeper the suffering and poverty portrayed by the show, the better its ratings.

Despite the straightforward emotional manipulation and the often-questionable tactics, these empathy plays create powerful emotional responses. They often worked on me as well. Sometimes as I watched the show before falling asleep alone in my boarding house room, my thoughts turned to my own parents, a world away, and their sacrifice. To my own loneliness and fear of death. My responses made me wonder, to what end does Indosiar enact empathy plays? What's the purpose? The broader sell?

Perhaps the passion of empathy functions much like the passion of dance. While some dangdut fans claim the song lyrics are unimportant, and only the beat, with its

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<sup>37</sup> This is especially striking given the fact that Indonesian children, especially first-born men, are usually expected to provide some financial support for their parents after they reach adulthood. By emphasizing his dependence on his mother, Arif—who probably actually does support his family with his career—is portrayed as a perpetual child.

hypnotic ability to move dancers, matters,<sup>38</sup> perhaps empathy creates a similar mind state. Men dance to forget their troubles and take their minds off their everyday lives. Perhaps Indosiar's viewers stir themselves up to emotion and empathy to put their lives in perspective. Indosiar's characters validate the suffering of the individual. Look at the poverty and struggle of Arif's mother, they say. She is a lesson for us in patience, in proper motherly behavior, in sacrifice and acceptance. And look, now she has fame. Her children are okay. Her struggles are seen. Empathy plays air the suffering of viewers. We suffer together, we cry together, and we go to sleep knowing we are not alone. However, given the superficial nature of many of the narratives presented, are the empathy plays satisfying? Do they merely diffuse the political potential of such feeling? Are they another realm of discipline displaying socially acceptable ways to release emotion?

#### Dangdut Competition Television as Public Sphere

I began this chapter with an exploration of women's bodies in public space in Java. I end by returning to public space by eliding to the idea of the public sphere. While women's access to public space for leisure is limited, they have gained access to a public sphere through social media. Dangdut television acts as a kind of public commons that women use to connect to one another. When relating to the stories enacted onstage, they feel they have been granted a voice. By using social media to comment and vote for contestants, women imitate and enact a shared concept of the nation-state and public participation.

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<sup>38</sup> See Weintraub 2010:132–133 for further discussion.

Because Indonesia is one of the world's youngest democracies, it is no surprise that its most popular singing competition television shows have a fraught relationship with voting, the voice of the people, and manipulation by the jury. As Katherine Meizel writes of *American Idol*, national televised singing competitions are caught up in ideas about national identity and politics, “where voters vote to determine a new pop star, a contestant is a candidate for election, and the successful singer typically performs both a clear individual identity and some kind of familiar ethnic, racial, religious, or regional identity, and demonstrates a relationship with larger narratives of Americanness” (Meizel 2011:2). On Indosiar, changing show formats mirror debates about what degree of democratic involvement is ideal and concerns about Jakarta government and bureaucratic corruption. Although Indonesians eagerly take part in elections, democracy and voting have a fraught history in the independent nation, from Sukarno's authoritarian “Guided Democracy” to the highly ritualized “Festivals of Democracy” under Suharto, of which John Pemberton cites President Suharto as saying, “We must perceive the General Election as a grand ‘pesta demokrasi,’ as a use of democratic rights which is responsible and is absolutely not turned into something that makes us tense and holds us in its clutches” (Pemberton 1994:5). In 2017–2018, anxieties about elections focused on false information spread on social media, nicknamed *hoks* (hoax) (see Hui 2020). People to whom I spoke spread rumors of poor village women paid to post and spread misinformation via social media like Instagram and What's App. Such anxieties about the voting process, corruption, and the very nature of democracy—i.e., whether the voice of



the majority should be trusted at all—were mirrored in social media debates about dangdut singing competition television.

People hesitated to voice concerns about dangdut television in in-person discussions, instead turning to social media to debate in comments on Instagram and YouTube. Debates on social media, often directly on Indosiar’s Instagram posts, act out the connection between political ideology and narratives swirling around the fairness or unfairness of the competition. Most notably, while voting in the competition was a popular activity, both jury and audience members voiced skepticism about the fairness of voting as a process for deciding who was eliminated, and most iterations of the show gave final say to the jury or to a separate panel of judges. Singers who won the popular vote were sometimes referred to derisively as the queens of the popular vote, with an implied distinction between the relative abilities of the audience and the judges to decide who was worthy. At other times, as when Arif was eliminated from Season One of *Liga Dangdut*, audience members shared their belief that the producers were ignoring the popular vote and manipulating the jury. When jury member Soimah cast the deciding vote that eliminated Arif despite him receiving second place in the popular vote and a standing ovation, Hikmah texted me, upset. She wrote, “It’s clear the process is very unjust. It’s obvious they planned this before the show. It makes me not want to watch the show anymore” (private text message, May 11, 2018). Later she told me, “It’s because he can’t dance as much as the others. They’re worried he won’t be entertaining.” For Hikmah, it was clear that Arif’s disability was a contributing factor to his elimination—

the producers did not think him a worthy representative, even though they milked his disability for pathos.

Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as a “sphere between the civil society and the state,” (Habermas 1989:xi), a definition which, according to Adrian Rauchfleisch, likely forms the least common denominator agreed upon in defining the public sphere (2017:4). In Habermas’s view, to paraphrase Craig Calhoun, a public sphere is a space in which argument can directly lead to political action, a space “constituted by private people putting reason to use” (Habermas 1989:xviii). Although Habermas views the public sphere as crucial to democracy, he also presents tensions with it; a public sphere should have both wide participation and a high quality of discourse to protect democratic systems, but how does a society measure and maintain high-quality discourse without limiting entrance to the public sphere?

Under this definition, dangdut shows themselves are not a public sphere, but the social media locations where audiences argue about them are. In addition, the constantly shifting voting formats of the show, and the stakes in representation for the nation, make commentary about dangdut competition television fertile ground to explore social media as a public sphere in Indonesia. What strikes me about this public sphere is the ways in which it is gendered. On Instagram, Vidio, and YouTube, both men and women engage in debates about aesthetics and producer’s decisions, but women post the majority of such comments. Habermas did not theorize gender in his concept of the public sphere. As Nancy Fraser points out, the rational, Enlightenment-era public sphere of which Habermas speaks was constructed deliberately to be unfriendly to women and stigmatize

women's salon culture as effeminate and aristocratic. Moreover, gender separation (women in private, men in public) was a key part of the bourgeois project (Fraser 1992:114–115). Publicity does not guarantee “accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies” (Fraser 1992:115). Kate Eichhorn writes that social media has significantly altered the access women and girls have to the public sphere, as it has provided “an affordable (in most instances, free) way to broadcast both one-to-many and many-to-many messages and to do so with virtually no outside censorship” (2020:2). While this comes with a price—social media communication is increasingly “collected, mined, and commodified” (Eichhorn 2020:7)—it has allowed women and girls to voice their concerns directly and find an audience for them. Similarly, Jon Anderson and Dale Eickelman argue that new media, which sit outside state control and “at the intersections of religious, political, and social life” (Anderson and Eickelman 1999:1) play a role in splitting and contesting both religious and political authority. Debates on Indosiar's social media accounts cover topics as varied as performance and talent, whether Indosiar should continue to broadcast earlier footage of women who now wear hijabs but did not previously, whether the shows go too late for women who need to get up and make breakfast before getting to work, and whether the jury is unjust for ignoring the voice of the people. Women's opinions and issues take center stage here, as Indosiar's main audience, and are assumed by all those who participate in Instagram comments to have value.

Thus, watching dangdut competition television and discussing it through social media both imitates participation in the democratic process and calls the systems of

governance into question. By voting and commenting on the process, women participate in a public sphere that debates the value of democracy and the role of religion in media as well as aesthetic judgements and throwing their weight as consumers. At the same time, the show producers enact their own ideals for the nation in the show's format, the types of bodies deemed deserving of empathy, and the voting process. With their voices, viewership, and purchasing power, women imagine and bring into being their own public spheres, ones that mirror the processes and systems of government and empowerment.

### **Women in Fan Groups**

As I described above, most women in Java take their leisure in private, in front of the television or with small groups of female friends. Not all women conform to these rules, however. In this section, I explore the experiences and contributions of women in dangdut fan groups. Women members of dangdut fan groups play a significant role in the operations of everyday band and singer activities. However, they also risk their reputations in a patriarchal society which, in general, frowns upon young women who travel alone or with unrelated young men. Women's participation in dangdut fan groups is noteworthy for several reasons. Dangdut has become infamous as a genre centered around the bodies of women singers who entertain a massive, mostly male live audience. As a result, middle-class Indonesians associate rural dangdut with erotic excess, an uneducated working class, and loss of control. I argue that women fans embrace fan clubs in the face of social disapproval for three reasons. First, many see active participation in fan clubs as a stepping-stone into more official labor as a manager or assistant in the competitive dangdut industry. For them, dangdut represents financial opportunity and

even class mobility. Second, dangdut clubs are, for many of these young women, a rare opportunity for social freedom and pleasure, especially with young men. Finally, many expressed the most obvious reason, embraced by young women in fan clubs across the world: they love the music too much to care what other people think.

I spent many hours in cars and on backs of motorbikes with the fans I describe here, driving to and from shows and events day and night. I stood with them in the audience; I also sang and danced in front of them on stage as a performer. In addition to participant observation, I also formally surveyed dangdut fans, and about nineteen percent of those who responded were women. All of these women were Muslim, and most between seventeen and thirty years old. Most were unmarried, and most have a high school education. Their existence goes largely unacknowledged by Indonesian society. Most middle-class Indonesians with whom I spoke expressed shock and disbelief that women could be fans of dangdut koplo. As Dan Lev asks, “Who bears more responsibility for being ‘traditional’ than women, and what could be more uncomfortable, even destabilizing, than women redefining themselves as something other than the wives and mothers they had always been?” (Lev 1996).

### Women and Fandom

Probably since the birth of popular music, young women’s fandom has been dismissed, belittled, and even mocked. Simone Driessen writes that “fandom is experienced as empowering for their selves, yet these women also need to cope with legitimizing their fandom to others” (Driessen 2018:33). On the other hand, young women fans also face industry pressures which attempt to stoke the very passion for

which they are mocked and leverage it for profit. Kristina Busse writes, “Capitalism insidiously suggests that love and labor may be anti-proportional, thus justifying the continued devaluation of labors of love, including reproductive labor, fan labor, and teaching labor. Fan labor is particularly vulnerable to being co-opted, however, because by its very nature, it is based on and driven by love and passion” (Busse 2015:113-114).

Fans are sometimes defined as active audiences. However, as Nicolle Lamerichs points out, this definition overlooks differences between how various audience groups participate. She writes, “contemporary fandom is more than a subset of participatory culture. These audience groups are defined by unique social spheres, interpretive stances, and forms of creativity” (Lamerichs 2018: 232). For the women who join fan groups that travel, the peculiarities of dangdut practice and social norms in rural East and Central Java shape the opportunities and limitations of fandom.



*Figure 54: Members of Monata's fan group in Pati, Central Java, July 2018. Photo by the author.*

### Fan Groups in Dangdut Koplo

To understand how young women's fandom is experienced in dangdut koplo, it is important first to understand the unique role fan clubs play in East and Central Javanese dangdut (Figure 54). I differentiate fan clubs from general viewers by their active involvement, the way they travel to attend events, and by their own self-identification as belonging to a club. While many viewers may think of themselves as supporters of a particular singer or group, those who construct social lives around their support stand apart. This is not to say that online or social media fandom are not valuable methods of participating in popular culture—on the contrary, I aim to illuminate the wealth and variety of women's dangdut fandom participation.

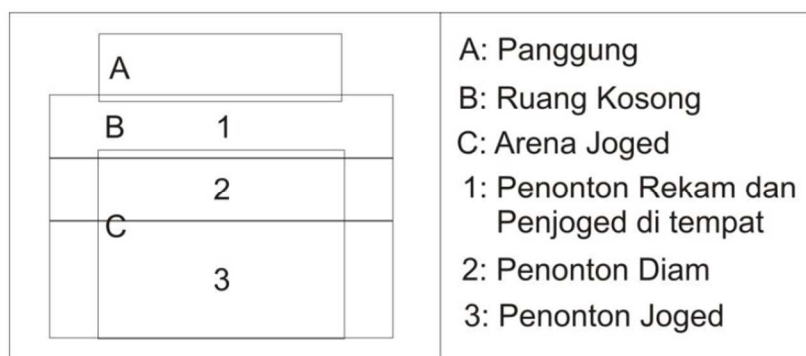
As I have already discussed (in the Introduction), both dangdut and koplo are contested terms. Most of my interlocutors refer to the music they make and enjoy as simply dangdut; when they use the term koplo, they refer to rhythmic treatment or form, or techniques of playing the kendang drum. However, when Jakartan music industry professionals talk about this music, many refuse to use the term dangdut at all and instead just call it koplo. I choose to use the term dangdut generally, as my interlocutors do, and to specify dangdut koplo when distinguishing the practice of Central and East Java. It's important to note that I am discussing fan organizations for groups and singers that identify themselves with dangdut koplo, and thus their fandoms are further distinguished from women watching television, who watch Jakarta-produced television dominated by dangdut *klasik*.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, successful and established dangdut bands of East and Central Java make most of their money from large, rural concerts sponsored by patron families or organizations. Often part of life cycle or seasonal celebrations, these concerts are almost always free to attend. The patron family or organization covers the often-significant cost of hiring the band and singers, building the stage, and hiring security. Most audience members are not members of fan clubs. Rather, they are guests—neighbors of the wedding party, or members of the business or organization holding the celebration, etc.

Fan groups are crucial for maintaining rural dangdut performance. Because entrance is free, the patrons and the band measure the success of the concert by the concept *rame* or *ramai* (the liveliness or busyness of the event), which reflects the band's



popularity and the patron's power and influence. Dangdut bands rely on fan clubs, with local chapters throughout the band's touring region, to advertise the event, attend it, dance with enthusiasm, and make sure the logistics run smoothly. Members of fan organizations travel and volunteer their labor, and are rewarded with music, access to celebrity, food and snacks, and even potential career development.



Gambar 16: **Penonton** terbagi berdasarkan arena joged. (oleh: Michael)

*Figure 55: A diagram of a dangdut koplo audience, used with permission from Michael Raditya. A: The stage. B: Empty space. C: Dancing space. 1: Audience members making recordings or dancing in place. 2: Quiet viewers. 3: Audience members dancing vigorously.*

In his 2013 thesis, Michael Raditya diagrams the audience composition at rural dangdut koplo performances (see Figure 55, above). While accurate, it does not include the location of fan groups, which are often (but not always) relegated to the sides outside of section one, often by physical fences or barriers. This sidelining ensures that more honored, local guests get the best views and space to dance and give tips if they so desire. In Figure 56 (below), members of Monata Mania dance on the sidelines of a concert in Pati, Central Java. While the fencing prevents them from getting close to the stage or having a good view of the band, they can see and communicate with the singers and MC in the backstage area. They are thus granted a different kind of access and are on call to help with any problems that might arise.



*Figure 56: Some members of Monata Mania dance on the sidelines. View from the singer's area onstage. Pati, Central Java, July 1, 2018. Photo by the author.*

Fan groups stand apart from other audience members, as they are not the target audience of the band's performance.<sup>39</sup> While bands and singers do try to develop strong fan bases, those fan groups function as a labor support system and not a direct source of income.

Singers and bands both have their own fan club following, though an individual fan may participate in multiple. Men form the majority of fan club members for bands by a wide margin. If Monata Mania is any indication of general fan club membership, men are about eighty percent of the total.<sup>40</sup> While women and men are represented in a more

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<sup>39</sup> As the most popular music of the nation, dangdut is the purview of the mainstream. Thus, fandom activities represent heightened activism and promotion of individual bands and singers rather than a subculture or the main target audience, as has been written of K-pop (see the introduction to Choi and Maliangkay 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Drawn from observation at concerts and an online survey of Monata Mania fan members.

balanced way in fan groups for singers, men's dominance in sheer numbers in band fan groups shows that women's participation is peculiar. In addition, the very lack of women in band fan clubs forms an additional barrier to future women's participation, as they do not have a model for fan club participation.

### Women in Fan Groups

Much has been written about men in dangdut audiences; Jeremy Wallach argues that for men in the audience, dangdut concerts become a kind of alternative popular nationalism to Suharto-era nationalist narratives and Islamic visions for the state, creating a utopia hampered only by gender divisions (Wallach 2014). In contrast to this utopian view of men in audiences, Henry Spiller's work *Erotic Triangles*, although only tangentially about dangdut, argues that men dancing in audiences understand the drumbeat and the dancing, singing woman onstage as a contextual cue allowing them to perform power relationships, compete for status, and release inhibition. In Chapter 1, I investigated how power plays out between women onstage and men in the audience. At concerts, the masses of men dancing in the audience are packed close together, their bodies moving in a hypnotic wave. They dominate the physical space, making their dominance in scholarly discourse understandable.

Given the focus in scholarship on audiences of men, and the fact that almost all my early interlocutors among fans were young men, it was easy at first for me to overlook the unique role women fans play in a band's success. Men often call dangdut's rhythm irresistible. Women audience members have a different experience. Women fans are limited in how openly they can express their enjoyment of music. Although women

agree that the rhythm of dangdut makes them want to dance—after all, the *kendang* drum resonates in their body much in the same way it does for men— women who brave outdoor concerts most frequently use language about guarding themselves against the power of the music and their emotions. Women claim to be susceptible to the call of dangdut in much the same way men do, but women internalize a social responsibility to guard themselves (and, by proxy, surrounding men) from too much pleasure and desire to avoid excess and violence. Thus, narratives and practices surrounding dangdut make explicit the norms and beliefs surrounding power, gender, and the body.

However, in contextually approved situations—private and mass-mediated environments like karaoke or television with friends, concerts with high security and designated women’s sections, or as part of community exercise or dance team called *pasukan* or *goyang damai*—women sing, express pleasure, allow themselves to be overcome with emotion, and dance. In the last thirty years, access to media technology in Indonesia has expanded rapidly. As a result of the end of New Order government control over media production and proliferating media technology, women who do not feel comfortable expressing their fandom in public spaces can do so from the privacy of their own homes. Their participation is powerful and valuable, as I describe above. However, in this section I focus on the women who travel with fan clubs. Not only are young women active in fan groups: they function as crucial intermediaries between singers, band management, and men fans.

I conducted most of my research on fan groups with the band orkes Melayu Monata. Monata’s fan group is called Monata Mania. I first learned about the official



existence of a women's branch of the club in July of 2018, even though I had worked with Monata Mania many times previously. Every year, Monata put on a concert especially for the fan club, called Monata Mania Family Gathering. I traveled with a group of fans from Pasuruan, East Java, along the North Coast Highway to Pati, Rembang, Central Java. Fans had come from all over Java and beyond to attend. Although I had met women who were members of Monata Mania, seeing the fan groups together for the first time, I learned about the women's branch, which calls itself Monatanita, a combination of the name Monata and an Indonesian word for woman, *wanita* (Figure 57).



*Figure 57: The author (second from right) with members of Monatanita, Pati, Central Java, July 1, 2018. Pujiyati on the far left.*

In contrast to band fan clubs, fan clubs for individual singers are often majority women. One unique factor of dangdut practice is that singers move independently of bands. Patrons hire the band, which then attempts to book singers in accordance with the budget and requests of the patron. While bands often have “regulars,” singers with whom they have often worked or who started their careers with that band, loyalty between singers and bands is tenuous, as I will show later. Women members of band fan groups may claim the name of the band, but their loyalties are often divided between band management and individual singers because, as women, they have access to singers that men fans do not have. Some of the women of Monatanita doubled up in fan groups of singers like Ratna Antika, who often sang with Monata, or other singers.

I interviewed Eka at the Monata Mania Family Gathering. Eka lived close to Pati, in Subah, near Semarang, along Jalan Pantura. She wore a dark blue hijab, which she had selected to match the fan t-shirts. She was twenty-three years old. After graduating from high school, she worked from home, selling clothing and shoes online through social media. Her eyes shone with enthusiasm.

“My mother wouldn’t let me go to concerts at first,” she told me, echoing a common refrain. “But then I showed her how positive it was. The community is so strong and my friends are all good people. And dangdut teaches good things,” she told me.

“Why did you join a fan club?” I asked.

“First, I love dangdut!” she responded. “And second, I get to hang out with my friends.”

Dangdut fan clubs remain precarious for women fans. Eka told me she has never had a problem with harassment, assault, or feeling unsafe at a Monata Mania event. However, at other concerts she said she always had to watch herself and always be aware. Other women have had even greater challenges, including sexual harassment and assault from within the club as well as social sanctions from outside. One fan, clearly tired of being criticized for her fandom, posted a selfie with me on social media with a caption reading, in low Javanese, “Are you still convinced women dangdut followers are terrible?” implying that my fandom as a woman and a foreigner legitimized her own fandom.

In my interviews with Eka, she chose not to focus on the gender stereotypes she challenges. She never expressed the opinion that what she does is in any way out of step with proper norms or religious edicts. At the same time, she acknowledged some of the limitations she experiences based on her gender. “I’m so glad the fan concert is in Central Java this year! [...] When it’s in East Java, I can’t go. I can’t travel that far. It’s too dangerous.” When I asked her how others in her community respond to her traveling with dangdut fan groups, she said, “It’s more like, they don’t condemn me, exactly, but many do wonder why I like dangdut even though more fans are men. But it’s true that many have said cruel things to me because I’m a fan of dangdut and even dance. However, I don’t get angry, because for me dangdut can always lift me up, when I’m feeling sad as well as when I’m already happy” (Personal comments, September 29, 2018).

## Women's Bodies in Fan Spaces

As Eka acknowledges, women fan club members face physical barriers and social sanctions. As they express their fandom, they cannot allow themselves the full freedom of expression the young men show at concerts. Their bodies are marked in the space; simply because they are women, others in the audience are hyperaware of their presence, and they in turn feel pressure to be hypervigilant about those around them. As a result, they use several strategies to protect themselves in fan spaces, working to maintain the freedom to move and travel, to enjoy music, and to participate in an active social life with men. These strategies are prominent while traveling, at concerts, and even on social media.

On August 18, 2018, I staggered off a bus in Pasuruan, East Java, to meet Nanang in front of a mosque. He laughed at how disheveled I looked before hoisting me and my backpack onto his motorcycle behind him. A month before, we'd made plans to attend the Monata Mania Family Gathering, an annual event only for the fan club. We planned to join the Pasuruan branch of the fan club and travel together to Pati for the event, at a cost of 300.000 rupiah, about twenty-two U.S. dollars at the time. Nanang was excited, and for a few hours we jetted around Pasuruan shopping for *oleh-oleh* (souvenirs) for Nanang's friends.

Finally, it was time to leave. Nanang had explained that the whole fan club would share a *travel*, a type of minibus commonly used for family or large group vacations. As promised, the travel was there, a packed grey behemoth. As we arrived, young men in Monata t-shirts were already filing aboard, but Nanang directed me to an SUV nearby.



“Nanang, why aren’t we going with everyone else?”

He shrugged. “Too many people.”

When I climbed into the middle row of seats in the SUV, however, I saw part of the answer. Two other women were in the car—the only other women on the trip. Titin had taken the front passenger seat and stretched out luxuriously. Another woman, whose name I later learned was Hidayah<sup>41</sup>, sat in the back corner, shyly playing on her phone while another young man sat on the other side. I followed Nanang onto the middle seat, taking the final place on the right side. Nanang sat in the middle, another man on his left. I was decidedly squished—not a desirable position for a young woman traveling overnight with young men, and the other two women seemed alert. The three of us were the only women traveling with Monata Mania’s Pasuruan branch.

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<sup>41</sup> Name changed at her request.

The night was restless. I tried to sleep pressed up against the window, but the women did their best to stay awake. Titin had to wear her hijab the entire night, and she adjusted it several times. She played dangdut and *qasidah*<sup>42</sup> at a deafening volume over the car's speakers and chatted with Nanang about what singers they liked best (Figure 58).



*Figure 58: Hidayah, Titin, and Nanang in the car. Pati, Central Java, August 2018. Photo by the author.*

At the concert itself, the young men abandoned their chairs and swarmed the stage. Some of them had started drinking on the drive over and were inebriated, but most were politely enthusiastic. They danced and cheered. The women who hadn't joined the crew (as I will discuss later) mostly kept to the chairs near the back of the room (Figure

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<sup>42</sup> While in other regions *qasidah* is a specific poetic tradition, in Indonesia *Qasidah* or *Qasida* refers to Islamic music broadly, and often takes the form of songs with religious lyrics with harmonies drawn from pop music and melismatic vocal techniques.

59). A few carried babies. Rarely did any of them stand and dance. They still seemed to enjoy the event, and none complained.



*Figure 59: Women gravitated toward the back of the room and sat with other women and children while most of the men danced in a crowd near the stage. Photo by the author.*

### Gendered Fan Labor

Fandom practices for women in dangdut clubs differ from other cases of fandom because of the crucial role fan clubs play in dangdut concerts. Their gendered fandom and gendered labor result in gendered power. Despite the disapproval and risks they face, because they are placed into a certain box and given gendered labor, they have the opportunity to take advantage of their unique position and leverage it for pleasure, access, and social (if not monetary) capital. However, they are still denied one of the basic pleasures of fandom readily available to men. They almost never get to dance,

surrounded by their friends, closing their eyes, and cutting loose completely into the pleasure of the music. Men fans are invited, even pressured, to openly express the physical pleasure they experience in public. Women fans, however, must carve out their own spaces in which they feel free to demonstrate pleasure in music and fandom.

Women fans often perform stereotypically gendered behavior for the band. At the Monata Mania Family Gathering of 2018, Eka, Lilis, and Titin were asked to help distribute t-shirts and food by the front door as the other (men) fans entered the performance space. While I expressed frustration to them over this gendered, and what I considered to be exploitative, fan labor, the three of them did not seem to mind. I later learned the reason. Women who participate as fans often have an advantage over men in generating income and visibility from their fandom, because they are trusted with gendered tasks. They are also trusted by singers, while men, categorically, are not (Figure 60). This gives women fans a niche role in dangdut practice.





*Figure 60: Lilis Manda, center in the blue hijab, with the singers of Monata Mania 2018. Photo used with permission from Lilis Manda.*

I will explain with an example. I first met Pujiyati during a dangdut tour. Because we had a show in the evening and another the next morning, the band management housed the singers and band overnight. I was in a cramped hotel room with the singer Rere Amora. In the morning, Pujiyati, dressed in a Monata Mania t-shirt, knocked on the door and asked if we wanted breakfast (Figure 61, below). Rere pressed some bills into her hand and Pujiyati left, returning half an hour later with paper packets of fried rice and chicken. She had bought a third for herself, and she sat on the floor with us, watching a 1990s Bollywood film on television as we scooped the food into our mouths with our fingers. Later, Rere was double booked. The band provided a driver so she could leave the concert for another show and come back. Pujiyati accompanied her to protect her reputation, the assumption being that alone with the driver, Rere was at risk, but with a

fellow woman in the car, no one would assume anything untoward—another iteration of women’s biopower surveillance being used for protection. By fulfilling these types of needs, women fans insert themselves as crucial components of the workings of East and Central Javanese off-air dangdut practice. Their assumed non-threatening sexuality allows them to serve as go-betweens between management and singers, which in turn allows them to get close to celebrities and increase their social capital.



*Figure 61: Pujiyati with singer Rere Amora at Rere's home in Sidoarjo. Used with permission from Pujiyati.*

Fans like Eka, Titin, Lilis, and Pujiyati engage in this labor with only small and occasional monetary compensation, for example receiving small tips from singers in return for buying food and running errands. A Marxian analysis would consider this exploitative, since fans produce far more value than that for which they are compensated

monetarily (Stanfill 2019:131). These are women who are, in many ways, on the fringes of Indonesian society. Although they are rarely impoverished, because they need a certain degree of mobility and skill, they tend to come from rural areas and have limited employment options. They often seek to increase their social capital and leverage it into better employment and better lives for their families.

Closeness with singers and the band manager can indeed engender career opportunities and social capital. Lilis's primary work was reselling wholesale clothes over her Instagram account, a line of work common for women as a home industry. After a few years of traveling with Monata Mania, she formed a close relationship with band manager Bunda Mintul Monata and got occasional work assisting singer Rere Amora. Backstage, as she hung out with singers and the photography teams hired to document shows, she eventually got her own digital camera and began taking portraits of singers on and offstage. She leveraged this burgeoning photography skill into her Instagram account, and soon had many more followers, which led to more sales.

In general, dangdut fan clubs are the purview of the young. After marriage, young women's participation begins to drop off. However, negative stigma towards women's fandom plays a role as well. When Pujiyati married a fellow fan club member, her social media feed abruptly switched from selfies with dangdut singers to wedding photos, home business advertisements, and, eventually, pictures of new babies and birthday parties. She still posted photos and videos with dangdut singers from years before, a nostalgic way to reconnect with her old social network. This life and behavioral progression is both natural and supported by society; in fact, many women like Pujiyati and Lilis find love through

their fandom. However, I see with some regret that she has lost access to a part of herself that brings her joy and social capital. While most of the men in fan groups are likewise young and unmarried, men who get married often still participate for several years. I met several married men in fan groups, but no married women who were actively traveling and no married couples participating together. While I have not yet confirmed with women like Pujiyati and Lilis whether social pressure from families or husbands hinders their involvement in fandom, I suspect gendered constrictions play a role in their absence. However, for both young men and young women, fandom is a labor of love, and when the pressures of adulthood begin to mount, their fandom becomes more passive. They move their fandom activities into domestic space, watching television like countless other women, but with selfies and fond memories of their time with celebrities.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored how women participate in dangdut as fans. I have shown how fan participation, both in front of a television and at concerts, powerfully shapes dangdut industries. However, gender norms limit the ways in which women can express their fandom without facing social repercussions. With their access to public space, leisure, and nighttime activities all limited, most women turn to television and social media to participate in dangdut. Their power as consumers influences dangdut television, which focuses on pathos and glamour, and powerful emotions, in contrast with off-air concerts, which tend to be much more open to interpretation in the interplay of melancholy lyrics with the pleasure of dance. Though many women dance when the context is appropriate—when at an event surveilled and supported by other women they



respect, or at home alone creating videos—most outdoor concerts are not safe spaces for women’s dance. Women find their own way to experience pleasure in the music when dance is unavailable to them. The pleasure of sound combined with the pleasure of empathy in the lyrics creates a cathartic experience for women who face social sanctions and limits.

At the same time, many women choose to sidestep the limits placed on their bodies by traveling with dangdut fan groups. These women face social and physical risks, but because they are women, they may also get career opportunities unavailable to them in other contexts and to men fans. Men are invited, even pressured, to openly express the physical pleasure they experience in public. Women, however, create their own spaces in which they feel free to demonstrate pleasure in music and fandom. While women’s “automatic” response to the dangdut drum is not the same as men’s, women like Hikmah and Eka stand for their right to enjoy music and fandom.

## Chapter 5: Beyond the Stage: Women in Dangdut Koplo Music Industries

In the last chapter I demonstrated how women's fandom contributes to dangdut's many faces and the conflict in the industry between televised and in-person practice. I also showed how women's participation in fan groups is crucial to dangdut koplo practice. However, as mentioned before, women hold roles far beyond fandom in dangdut koplo industries. Women are producers, tastemakers, television hosts, managers, MCs, radio personalities and curators. Their presence in these roles is the rule, not an exception, in dangdut koplo practice; they constitute the genre by making careers out of their involvement in the music.

Women come to work in dangdut in roles beyond singing in two main ways. Those who come through their family have relatives involved in dangdut, *karawitan*, *qasidah*, or another traditional music or dance, or their family members push them to perform from a young age. Others come to dangdut industries through education. These women attend a technical high school or university and get degrees in media, journalism, communications, or MCing.

In this chapter, I will discuss women who are band managers, MCs, television producers, radio DJs, and musicians. I offer the experiences of seven women who explain their career choices in their own words, showing how each individual woman moves through intersecting media structures, how national television and radio structures interact with social media and on-the-ground experience to shape how lives are lived and careers made. I also draw some conclusions about how women come to dangdut careers and how they imagine their roles, responsibilities, and opportunities within the industry.

While there are exceptions, by and large band managers and musicians come from the first category—they arrive at a dangdut career because of family involvement. In contrast, producers and radio DJs usually arrive at their career because of education. Many do not start as dangdut fans at all. They thus bring an outsider perspective to the music. MCs—often also called presenters or hosts, and a thriving career role both on and off television in Indonesia—may fall into either category. Many are singers whose careers took a detour, while still others attend a university and get a degree in journalism or communications.

I frame women's involvement in dangdut industries through the lens of aspirations. While aspiration—to improve or change yourself, your circumstances, or the world at large—may seem like a universal human impulse, I see aspiration as a way to position oneself in the world, and to imagine a self as capable of acting to change the world and to surmount obstacles. I argue that such a self concept is profoundly cultural, and is shaped by circumstances, psychology, and the stories we tell ourselves. For many of the women involved in dangdut koplo industries, their aspirations are viewed as unusual by their families and communities. Women participate in dangdut industries to further their own personal aspirations for social mobility and stability. Dangdut is the most lucrative music industry in Indonesia, and even the women who are not fans see the profit to be made from that career.

On the other hand, all these women shape the industry itself, and their involvement shows their aspirations for what dangdut can become and their belief in their own moral responsibility [I. *tanggung jawab moral*] toward their audiences. By virtue of

their positions, they can enact their attitudes toward their work, the music, and its audiences, upon the industry. Many university-educated producers see dangdut audiences as in need of guidance, or *masih bodoh*. While they seek to make a profit and attract advertisers, their aspirations also include narratives about their responsibility to teach proper morals and ethics to their audiences. Thus, their aspirations stretch beyond their own career and elucidate a vision for the future of Indonesia as a nation. This vision contains many leftovers from New Order media practices—narratives about responsibility to guide, protect, and educate Indonesia’s *rakyat*, or common people—while at the same time producers balance these narratives with the demands of audiences and advertisers in Indonesia’s relatively new free-market media landscape. While the manner differs greatly, women in dangdut-related careers reflect and embrace the shocks to society since the fall of the New Order while enacting their own visions for the future of Indonesia through their labor.

### **Women’s Work in Creative Industries**

Research on sound and music technology and record production in particular was relatively neglected until recent decades (Frith 2007; Hennion 1989). Although many studies, both scholarly and industry, have begun to seriously evaluate the roles of producers and recordists (Negus 1992; Moylan 2015; Zak 2001; Theberge 1997; Burgess 2013; Warner 2003), as Paula Wolfe points out, “the attention paid to the female recordist has often been limited to noting her under-representation [...] the impact of the under-representation of women working specifically in the field of music production—whether as music producers or as artist-producers—has been under-researched” (Wolfe 2019:5).

Of the forty issues published by *The Journal on the Art of Record Production* during Wolfe's study, only one "examined issues of gender and the work of women in music production," (Wolfe 2019:6) and it was Wolfe's own work (Wolfe 2012).

Scholars of popular music have written remarkably little about women in roles besides musician (most often singer) and fan. In the last decade as creative industries have become increasingly informal, scholars, journalists, and industry professionals alike have begun to draw attention to gender inequalities in the music industry. Much of the literature that exists highlights and tries to explain the lack of women in decision-making industry roles. Marion Leonard writes, "Many roles within the music industries are segregated by sex, meaning that the majority of people taking up particular jobs are either men or women. Work within marketing and public relations is often carried out by women, whereas men continue to dominate in areas such as A&R (artist and repertoire), music production, and sound engineering" (2016:37, see also Gmeiner and Kolokytha 2020; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015). The inequality in the US and UK is impossible to ignore: "In the UK, the Fawcett Society's annual Sex and Power (2013) audit report indicates that there is not a single female Chair or Chief Executive of a Television company; men outnumber women by more than 10 to 1 in decision-making roles in media companies; and women constitute only 5% of editors of national newspapers" (Conor et al. 2015:5). This is not just a problem of sex segregation by work; as David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker point out, it is also associated with income inequality, as jobs gendered to women are almost always paid less (2015:25). In Leonard's view, this segregation is partly due to beliefs about women's capabilities. In the US popular culture

industry context, Leonard identities associations with girlhood and girlishness—often perpetuated by the industry or relied on for portraying singers and appealing to fans—as partly responsible for the struggles women face breaking into male-dominated roles. Thus even roles that require emotional sensitivity and labor, as Allan Watson and Jenna Ward point out of recording engineers and studio producers (2013) are associated with masculinity and dominated by men. Colette Henry points out that though women are expertly suited to creative industries, women are not recognized for their creative achievements at the same pace as men.

Scholars grappling with the “why” of gender inequality have identified several common themes in North America, Western European, and Australian industries. Bridget Conor, Rosalind Gill, and Stephanie Taylor call this an “inequality regime” in creative work. Freelancing, informality, and precariousness all likely contribute to forcing women out. Fetishizing the creative and ignoring the work element. Catherine Strong and Sarah Raine (2018) likewise argue that creative industries’ values of individualism counterbalance any claims such industries have to tolerance and inclusion. Similarly, Tami Gadir points out that creative industries are prone to claiming to prioritize skill over equality and claiming inequality is irrelevant, and that informal organization often leads to a lack of accountability for discrimination in hiring (Gadir 2017:51). Mark Taylor and Dave O’Brian likewise argue that culture industries hold to ideas of meritocracy (2017:3). Boden Sandstrom argues that working as a sound engineer requires women to take on a genderless quality because the field is so deeply gendered masculine (2000:301), while Andra McCartney argues that the “(im)possible position” of

composing and sound engineering opens for women a wider range of possibilities (McCartney 2003:89). In response to these factors, Paula Wolfe argues that many women artists turn to self-production in home studios to take control of their sound (2019:9).

Most music industry studies that discuss gender and women outside of fandom and musicianship come from sociology or a related field. Journalists and industry watchdogs also increasingly monitor gender inequality (McCormack 2017). While these perspectives are crucial, this work differs in significant ways. I attend to women in music industries in Indonesia, where gender discrimination in work is markedly different—though still present—compared to Western Europe, North America, and Australia, where most studies have taken place. My research shows women’s relative presence and agency in decision-making and technical roles in dangdut koplo industries compared to the studies above. As an ethnomusicologist rather than a sociologist, I use ethnographic methods to reveal how individual women position themselves in the industry and respond to challenges (rather than document industry-wide issues). In doing so I echo Paula Wolfe’s call to “contribute to the ‘collective enterprise’ of feminist popular music critics that has interrogated the reception of women’s creativity in popular music at other key points in history” (Wolfe 2019:15). What emerges is a story of women who struggle, but who see themselves as creative industry actors, shaping the trajectory of dangdut koplo in Indonesia in a variety of ways.

Studies of women in mid-level music industry work outside of North America, Australia, and Western Europe remain rare. One notable exception is Angela Impey’s 1992 dissertation about women producers, disc jockeys, managers, and promoters within

the Zimbabwe music industry, whom men in the industry denied respect and attempted to silence. In a more recent study of women musicians in Zimbabwe, Agnella Viriri (2014) highlights the progress women have made as musicians via agentive efforts. Another rare example is Frederick Moehn's discussion of Fernanda Abreu, in which he attends to her skill as a mixer in addition to her work as a performer (2008). Some attempts have been made at global analysis of gender bias in music industries using open source metadata (Wang and Horvát 2019). Nonetheless, ethnomusicological attention to women in music industry roles remains rare. In Indonesia, this lack is particularly striking because women were not conspicuously absent (as Impey describes) or forced into home production scenes. Women were conspicuously present; their backgrounds and motivations rich and varied. This chapter represents a beginning effort at paying tribute to their experience.

### **Women Who Come to the Industry through Family**

Family is a powerful influence in career choice, and this is true for dangdut careers. For many women, dangdut careers come naturally through family involvement or encouragement. For some, like Bunda Mintul, dangdut was and is a family business. For others, like Lenny and Yuli, their families encouraged and supported their early talent and interests. Regardless, these women see themselves as inherently close to dangdut and do not separate themselves from dangdut's audience. Even if they pursue university education or explore other popular culture mediums, they see dangdut as a core of themselves. As a result, their hopes for dangdut center on expanding the fanbase, innovating, and protecting their own careers.



## Managers

In dangdut koplo, managers are usually responsible for bands—orkes Melayu—rather than for individual artists. Managers coordinate musicians, receive and negotiate requests for concerts from patrons, and manage contracts<sup>43</sup> for individual singers for each show. In addition, they may also negotiate recording contracts and manage the technical aspects of shows, from security and building the stages to the audio-visual recordings for concerts. Because most concerts are put on with makeshift temporary stages in dry rice fields or cramped kampung streets, the technical aspects of concerts are complex, and many bands have longstanding contracts with production companies that travel with them during tours. Because of the myriad of responsibilities placed on managers' shoulders, many orkes Melayu are managed by husband-and-wife teams, with the husband focusing on musicians and security, while the women manage singers and negotiate with patrons. This sometimes causes trouble, as the divorce rate in Java is high and splits between husband and wife often result in splits between bands. Orkes Melayu featuring the word “new” often come from exactly this type of split, where neither group is willing to give up the old group name, and so OM Palapa and OM New Palapa, for example, are two bands created from one, each run by half of a divorced husband and wife pair.

Many women also manage dangdut bands on their own, without the help of a husband. As discussed in early chapters, the work of negotiation and making deals is not

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<sup>43</sup> Contracts vary by the event and parties involved. When a manager books a dangdut singer for a show, the contract is usually written and agreed upon via instant message (usually WhatsApp), where the manager and singer negotiate terms. In contrast, a contract from a television station, even for a single performance, is highly formal, but may not be previously negotiated. The singer may be presented with an envelope and asked to sign a receipt for cash received. The receipt is then kept by the studio. I never saw long-term contracts between a band and singer or band and production company.

seen as antithetical to women's work in Java—quite the opposite. During fieldwork, I met as many women managers of OM as men. In this section I discuss two women who manage orkes Melayu. The first, Yuli, began her career as a singer before switching to dangdut band management. She founded her own orkes Melayu and production company, and also manages the singing career of her daughter, Alice. The second woman I will discuss, Bunda Mintul, grew up helping her family's dangdut business. Today she works in tandem with her husband to manage OM Monata.

“Your Milk, Your Back, Your Success is from Dangdut!”: Yuli (Bunda Pelangi)

Yuli, who also goes by the professional name Bunda Pelangi, is a prominent band manager in East Java. In addition to managing Orkes Melayu Arka, she always runs the production company Arkadewi Musik and manages the dangdut career of her daughter, eighteen-year-old Alice.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Yuli is well-respected in East Java. While her band and her daughter are not as famous as many others, Yuli's business acumen has ensured they continue to get high profile jobs. Through her production company, she is able to produce music and music videos for Alice and Arka.

Like many managers, Yuli began her career as a singer, and I discussed her experience in that career in Chapter 2. To summarize, Yuli was born to an educated but struggling family. Her father was a public-school teacher who, in 1992, made only Rp. 30.000 a month. To help support the family, every Saturday night Yuli's father would take her to a complex of hotels in Tretes, in the mountains outside of Malang, to earn some cash entertaining guests. She started doing this at the age of twelve and could make

about Rp. 5.000 per show. While still performing in middle school, she caught the attention of the governor of East Java, dangdut fan Basofi Sudirman, who supported her career. She, in turn, was able to support her younger siblings and move her family out of the government housing provided for public employees. She performed in cities all over Indonesia and wisely saved enough money to pay for a university education.

Most dangdut singers do not see university as the key to their success after their singing careers fizzle out. Most try to find other types of businesses or marry well enough that they will not have to worry about money. However, with family encouragement, Yuli saw how the skills learned by taking classes in business and hospitality at university would help her diversify her businesses and build an empire. In contrast to dangdut television producers, discussed later, university education was not the key to Yuli's dangdut career; rather, it was a step she shrewdly took to shore up her future businesses, including those focused on dangdut.

Yuli also strategized her career shift in relation to how well singers were respected in dangdut. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, when the field became saturated and dangdut singing ceased to be respected, she gave up singing. She explained that many singers at that time started singing not because of love for the music, but purely because of economic need. In Yuli's view, that economic need sometimes stretched to sex work. In Chapter 2, I included excerpts of the interview in which she discussed her experience. In short, the expectation of sex work weighed heavily on her mind. Tired of harassment and mixed expectations from male patrons and audience members, she put her energy into education, side businesses, and her daughter. After getting her degree, she

worked in high-end tourism for a while, lived in Bali, and used her new skills to run a series of side businesses, leveraging her powerful contacts and her knowledge of English to expand and diversify her empire. She eventually invested some of the money she made into founding OM Arka Music and supporting her daughter's career.

*A Majapahit Queen*



*Figure 62: The view of Gunung Arjuna from Yuli's terrace. Photo by the author.*

I first met Yuli at Stasiun Dangdut, but I soon got to know her in other contexts as well. She and Lenny were devoted friends, and one day Lenny invited me to go with her to Yuli's home in Trawas, Mojokerto. Lenny's son drove us around south Surabaya shopping for under-hijab modesty accessories—I later found out Lenny had recently tried to convince Yuli to start wearing a hijab—before driving into the mountains of Trawas.

Yuli lived there with her daughter Alice, her mother and father, her husband at the time, and her new baby. The house was grand, filled with Javanese iconography and evidence of Yuli's economic success, including a cabinet of expensive wine and a second-floor terrace looking out at the volcano Arjuna (Figure 62). That evening it was too dark to see the volcano, but Lenny, Yuli, and I sat drinking sweet tea on the terrace as the neighborhood gamelan, mainly ibu-ibu, rehearsed in the courtyard below on Yuli's family gamelan, led by Yuli's mother and father.

Unlike most singers and dangdut managers, Yuli was perfectly comfortable with a formal interview, and indeed took the lead with a clear and practiced recitation of dangdut history in the region. I learned about her managerial style by watching her in action, from the television studio to how she promoted music videos. Yuli organized people and gave them opportunities, and by doing so created a loyal base of friends and employees. As I described in Chapter 2, dangdut singers self-consciously develop and maintain social connections and ties to the community and their families by creating relationships of obligation in a system that reflects a "big woman" system of patronage. Yuli is a master of this strategy, providing food and work for the most abject of her

community while carefully building connections with powerful producers and MCs by bringing food and gifts to the studio.

Yuli counted herself among true dangdut fans and singers, someone who understood the music deeply. She differentiated herself from singers and others who were only interested in making money.

Yuli: That's why I want to tell you, most dangdut singers right now don't have soul [I. *jiwa*] when they sing. They only know [in English] how to make money. How to make money with dangdut. [...] [In Indonesian] singers who sing with soul, they often sing their own songs.

Yuli's work centered on this idea. Yuli created a band, a production and recording company, and hired songwriters in house. When her daughter became a singer, Yuli used all these resources in support of Alice's career but in line with her own vision. Yuli's strategy is thus one of all-encompassing creative control in service of dangdut that meets her standards: not relying on eroticism, inclusive, full of soul, and Javanese. Very Javanese, as I explain below.

In many of Alice's music videos, although Alice is the singer and the star, Yuli makes it clear that she is the true power behind the production. In the 2019 music video for "Grahono," Yuli appears onscreen as a Majapahit-era queen surrounded by a royal court. As this fictional queen, Yuli orders Alice's true love to marry someone else, sending her retinue, armed with *kris*, to escort him from Alice's side (Figure 63). Alice sings about holding onto her lost love, even though he's already married to someone else. In the final shots, Yuli holds the hands of the young couple together in her lap while Alice, alone and forlorn, looks off into the distance and weeps. While Alice is the main character and the vocalist, the video pays tribute to Yuli's power as manager, not just of

Alice and the orkes Melayu, but also of sound technicians, videographers, and everyone else involved in the production.



*Figure 63: Yuli, dressed as a queen in the music video for "Grahono." Used with permission from Arka Music.*

Yuli spends most of her days coordinating people, and her network reveals the extent of her efforts. Her strategy is twofold: first, provide jobs and security for those without opportunities in her village, and second, find and develop elite talent. While the second seems obvious, the first is equally crucial to her success. By providing job opportunities for the impoverished or stigmatized who live near her, Yuli nourishes a reputation as a powerful and wealthy person while simultaneously developing a loyal base of support. Every time OM Arka Music leaves Trawas for a performance, even just at *Stasiun Dangdut*, where support and technical staff are already available, the caravan involves buses and multiple cars.

One day I traveled in one such car with Alice. We sat in the back seat, Alice focused on her social media, posting images from the performance she'd just had and livestreaming with fans. I chatted with the driver, a careworn but fit-looking man of advanced middle age. He told me his name was Pak Khat and joked about it being like the English word "cat."

"I can't smell anymore," he told me.

"Can't smell?" I asked, certain I'd misunderstood.

"He's a thug," Alice said casually. I scanned her face, trying to understand the joke.

"It's true," he said. "I was a *preman*. Alice's mother gave me a good job, so now I drive and protect Alice."

"And your nose?" I asked, confused by the joke and stunned by his casualness discussing his past.

"I got punched a lot, and my nose broke too many times."

Yuli's generosity did not only extend toward ex-convicts. She also openly hired *waria*, or trans women, in multiple capacities and promoted their visibility. Whenever Alice sang at Stasiun Dangdut, her makeup artist would accompany her and sit backstage to watch the show. She referred to Yuli as a good friend and shared makeup tips with me while we waited for Alice to change her clothes.

"My male name is Andre!" she said when I introduced myself. She gestured at Yuli, who had just returned to the soundstage, dressed incognito in a floor-length dress



and hijab, carrying her baby on her hip. “Bunda Yuli gave me this job when others in my town wouldn’t.”

Yuli also featured waria actors in her music videos, most notably in the Roman Majapahit series of three videos. In the first video, Alice walks with a *waria* friend when they come upon two men. Alice falls in love with the younger man, while her friend falls for the elder. In the second video in the series, that couple acts as a sometimes-humorous foil for Alice and her lover.

These testimonials were echoed by how industry professionals like Lenny and Gita respected Yuli. Noting both her financial and organizational power, their behavior towards her was always deferential. This was not always the case with other dangdut band managers. While other band managers had more successful bands, Yuli’s university education and community-based approach marked two major differences. Because of that education, she could speak the language of producers, most of whom likewise have bachelor’s degrees. But perhaps even more powerfully, Yuli drew on Javanese customs of gift and obligation to solidify business and community relationships. No one was below her attention, and her home became the center of community activities for women in particular, who participated in music ensembles and weekly *senam* exercise there (see Figure 64). Yuli felt a moral responsibility not to audiences, but to family and community: a moral responsibility to provide and protect.



Figure 64: Neighborhood women do their daily senam exercises to music in Yuli's courtyard. Photo by the author.

*Attitudes toward Dangdut and Audiences: "Proud of Dangdut"*

Although Yuli has been able to improve her family's socio-economic standing, she does not see dangdut fans as a separate class from herself. In contrast, she credits dangdut with her success and prioritizes giving back to her community. Switching primarily to English, she told me emphatically, with tears in her eyes:

Yuli: Andrea, I am very proud [using the English word proud]. Andrea, I am very proud of dangdut. I'm like, just like I've told you. I got to go to university. [switching to English] I get rich. I get everything, I get friend from dangdut, and then I go to everywhere with dangdut. [Switching back to Indonesian] I felt it keenly [I. *rasain*], [in English] but I always survive. How to make good life, through my father, because last time my father tell me, what do you want? Lifestyle? Because we are women. Lifestyle or live well? Lifestyle or live well. My father. If you change lifestyle you will look good-looking, but you have

nothing. If you have live well, so you must be very job very hard and then must be... [pause]. But me, I always tell to my father, I don't want to choose [laughs]. I want to be live well and lifestyle [*sic*]. And my father [said], if you can, you can. Okay, I give you free to get. And then, [in Indonesian] how many years [I. *sudah beberapa tahun*]? [In English] Twenty-five years I to be singer, and then it's ending. And my daughter, my daughter likes *apa itu*, Guns and Roses, and I told you, your milk, your back, your success is from dangdut!

Yuli's father asked her whether she wanted to pursue "lifestyle," meaning fancy clothes, beauty, cars, and the other trappings of wealth and success, or "live well," which from the context I interpret to mean a good, happy life surrounded by family. When she described her response, that she would insist upon both, her eyes glinted. In her mind, I believe, she succeeded; not only does she have a beautiful home and a glamorous lifestyle, she is also surrounded by loyal family and community, and she dedicates her life to preserving their well-being. She is powerful and in control, the center of that family unit. And yet she continues to give credit to dangdut and devote her energies to the industry, and, equally important, to the people in it, from fans to drivers to producers. While she is proud of the lifestyle she's achieved, she remains equally proud of dangdut, to the point that she is disappointed when her daughter shows an interest in rock, a genre of music considered upper-middle class and cosmopolitan in Java. For Yuli, this interest shows a dangerous lack of gratitude to the genre and fanbase that formed her "milk," her "back," and her "success." While Yuli repeatedly switched between English and Indonesian during our conversations, with the likely motivations of demonstrating her education and cosmopolitanism as well as a chance to practice again with a native speaker, her extensive use of English at this point in the interview reflects her desire to

make me understand clearly this all-important motivation, which has been fundamental to her choices throughout her career.

Yuli is a dangdut true believer. In contrast to producers discussed later in this chapter, she does not separate herself from dangdut audiences. Her vision of dangdut is one that possesses genuine soul rather than an avenue for profit. Her vision of dangdut centers powerful women, traditional Javanese values, and community solidarity even while disparaging explicit erotics in the music, especially for profit.

#### A Management Family: Mintul (Bunda Monata)

Mintul, whom singers fondly called Bunda Monata, represents the other side of the spectrum for women dangdut managers. She speaks very little Indonesian and mostly communicates in Javanese. I first met her on a stage at a wedding in Pati, Central Java. At first, I did not realize who she was. It was my first experience touring with OM Monata. In the “backstage” singer’s corner, about a dozen women sat correcting makeup and chatting. I knew some of the singers from my research at Stasiun Dangdut. Some of the women were not singers, however; that was clear from their clothing and appearance. A few were fans. Others were mothers or other assistants, whom singers brought along to help with makeup and clothing as well as to protect their reputations and stave off the loneliness of the road. At first, I took Mintul to be one of these mothers. She looked much like them, dressed in pale blue from her skirt to her hijab. The other singers showed deference to her, however, and soon I learned to take my cue from the other singers and I showed her deference, as I would to anyone older than me. Eventually my brain,

exhausted from sleeping on the bus the night before, registered that she was running the backstage area.

Mintul was not one for lengthy interviews. Her days were spent running at full tilt managing her business. Nor did she like being photographed. She found many of my questions silly, as though the answers should be obvious. She was, however, always kind and thoughtful as she teased me gently, and I was happy to have her see me as a silly *bule*.

Bunda Mintul was born into a dangdut family and married into another. She had very little formal education, and instead helped her parents with their work managing a dangdut band. She never showed interest in being a singer; her time and efforts were always more focused towards management. With this background, her approach to management was more conventionally band-focused than Yuli's.

Mintul manages OM Monata with her husband Gatot. They also have some side businesses, including managing some properties along Java's north coast. But managing Monata takes most of their time, and they were together able to build Monata into one of the most successful dangdut koplo bands, one that maintained its popularity from the 1990s until the present day.

#### *Coordinating Singers, Handling Money*

While couples manage dangdut bands together, the management work is often divided in similar ways across couples. For example, men tend to handle negotiating security and running rehearsals, while women manage relations with singers and most of the money. Mintul and Gatot's partnership worked by the book in this regard, with

Mintul fielding requests from patrons, paying singers, organizing *saweran*, running social media, and in general accompanying singers and serving as their main point of reference for the band.

When I first met Bunda Mintul, she was busy fielding song requests from patrons. Songs are decided almost entirely by request, which are subject to change until the moment the concert begins. Song requests are sometimes part of initial negotiations, but it's not uncommon for a request list to be delivered to the MC and band during the sound check. With Monata, the MC would pass the request list to Bunda Mintul, who would gather the singers to divvy up the songs yet unaccounted for (Figure 65). After fielding the debate, she would copy the new setlist by hand and deliver it to the MC. Sometimes singers would scramble for scraps of paper and write down lyrics to the new song they were being asked to learn, which Mintul would then tape to a speaker out front.

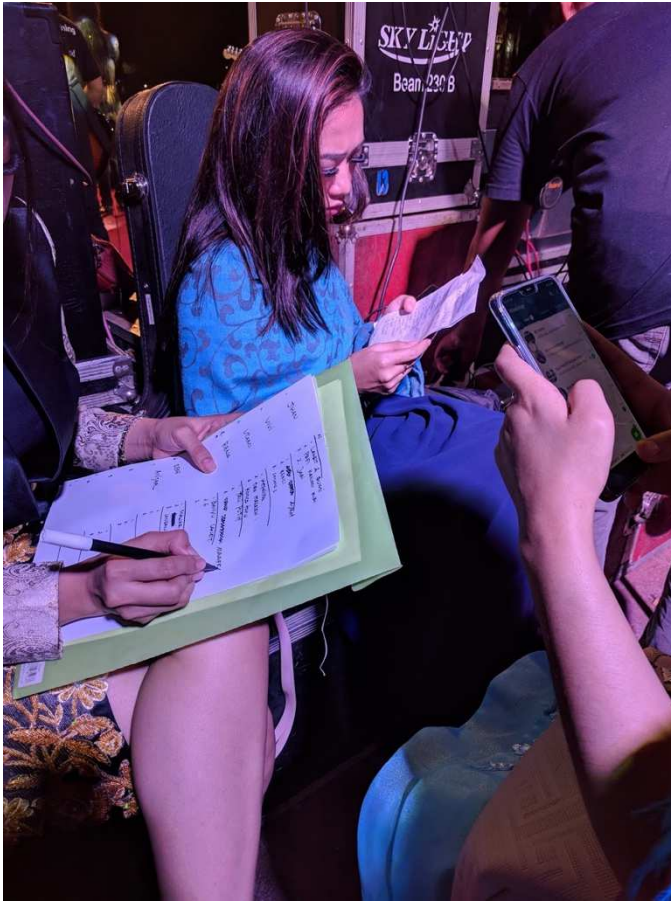


Figure 65: Rena Movies and other singers finalize the setlist. Photo by the author.

Bunda Mintul also negotiates wages for singers and distributes the *saweran*. Ahead of the performance, Mintul negotiates a set wage for *bintang tamu* (guest artist singers) via WhatsApp. She later delivers that wage, plus any share of the *saweran* as negotiated, via envelope after the singer's set. Other singers have long-term arrangements with the band. Rere Amore, for example, often traveled with the band and performed almost exclusively with them. Mintul is also in charge of negotiating those arrangements and assuring singers are happy. Mintul's husband Gatot more often takes the lead in negotiations with the family or organization throwing the party, the *tuan rumah*, though

Mintul is usually involved as well. She may negotiate with the *tuan rumah* about whether or not audience members will give *saweran*—some wedding parties prefer to pay more up front—what security will be involved, etc.

In order to be able to apportion *saweran* after the concert, Mintul also must organize it during the event itself. These tips are given from an audience member directly to a singer as she performs. When the singer's hands are full, she drops the colorful bills into a cardboard box. When that cardboard box fills up, the MC carries it back to Mintul, who counts it and stores it away. As described in the Introduction, if small bills are in short supply in the audience, she will exchange their large bills for the small bills they already gave in tips, because a continuous flow of small bills keeps the mood festive.

When a singer does not travel with their own retinue, Mintul and other women managers serve as a kind of protection and accompaniment. They sit in the singer's backstage area, check up on them at hotels, even ride with them in cars.

In the last few years Mintul has taken charge of Monata's social media. Bands and patrons usually hire videographers for shows, and their professional videos, uploaded to YouTube and sold on VCD, make up much of a band's social media and promotional strategy. However, in recent years, Instagram has become as important as YouTube and VCDs for promoting a band. Mintul acknowledged that she was not comfortable managing social media at first. She preferred to let singers and audience members promote the band on their own accounts. But eventually she gave in. She posts almost daily on her own account and helps to field content for the official Monata Instagram account.



Like Yuli, Mintul spends most of her day in concrete work towards dangdut success, and so she spends little time pondering the trajectory of the industry. However, Rere and Nasha told me that Mintul was a significant reason for Monata's success, and that her iron will when it came to issues like singer reputations was part of the reason. When some members of OM Monata broke off from the band to form their own group, Nasha doubted that singers would want to perform with the new group. "Without Bunda Mintul there to keep the musicians under control, what singer would want to risk it?" Mintul was likewise instrumental in maintaining modesty standards among singers. While sleeveless dresses, short skirts, and cleavage were not unheard of, Mintul put her foot down about singers in miniskirts and short tube tops. In addition to ensuring the longevity of OM Monata by protecting it against religious critics and promoting its mainstream appeal, she promoted her own values and her aim to see singers recognized as artists.

Both Yuli and Mintul are powerful, influential women who shape East and Central Javanese dangdut koplo. They each aspire to protect their own interests, Mintul through working each day to protect and support the band name she's been able to build, Yuli through using her degree and contacts to build a dangdut band that will impact the industry and preserve her family, using media instead of touring to do so. Mintul spends her days and nights on the road, while Yuli prefers to return to her home base. But despite their differences, both women are examples of the influence women hold as managers of orkes Melayu in dangdut koplo.

## **Musicians**

Of all the careers available to women in dangdut koplo, musician is the role they take the least often. I here use the term musician to cover all possible instrumentalist roles in dangdut koplo and to differentiate those roles from the role of singer. Certainly singers are musicians; however, dangdut koplo practitioners themselves use these terms to distinguish singers from the bands (musicians are often referred to as *musisi*). In addition, in dangdut koplo, the roles of singers and musicians are not merely about instruments. They also designate whether the person in question travels with the band, how they're hired, and their pay scale and responsibilities. As shown in Chapters 2 and 3, singers move in different circles from band members. As I discuss below, women kendang drum players trouble these distinctions in curious ways.

At the time of fieldwork, between 2017 and 2018, there were only two working dangdut koplo bands, or orkes Melayu, made up of women in East and Central Java: New Kendedes in Kediri, East Java, and Qasima in Magelang, Central Java. Each OM is made up entirely of women; I have never observed an OM that mixed genders in their regular lineup. In addition to these two OM, there are a few women who, like singers, are hired on an event-by-event basis, but who play the dangdut kendang in addition to (and often while) singing. The kendang is the most prestigious instrument in dangdut koplo, and women who can sing while playing form a niche koplo spectacle. Mutik Nida and May Devi Narulitasari were notable pioneers in that regard, inspiring more young women and girls to learn to play kendang. While the visibility of famous women musicians like Epep of New Kendedes and Mutik Nida encourages more women to learn to play prestigious

instruments and troubles the traditional gender roles ascribed in dangdut koplo, women musicians are still limited to either women-only bands or to touring much like singers. Women musicians are expected to prioritize appearance in a way not expected of men musicians. In addition, many women musicians stick to religious variants of dangdut koplo—namely qasidah groups that play koplo covers—to protect their reputations.

In the following section, I discuss two pioneering women musicians. The first is Epep, full name Evi Endriani, the kendang drummer for OM New Kendedes. New Kendedes, based in Kediri, East Java, shows some signs of explicit feminism and also promotes Javanese culture and identity. In contrast, Mutik Nida performs much like a singer—hired per show, she performs only a few songs per concert, taking over for the regular drummer with a standing kendang kit, often singing while she plays. Mutik Nida wears the hijab as a sign of her piety and often posts on Instagram about her conservative Islamic views. This may help to protect her reputation, but it also opens her to criticism from her fanbase when she performs with other singers who are deemed too erotic.

Epep: Kendang Player for OM New Kendedes

I first heard the story of Ken Dedes in 2013, when I visited the Singhasari temple for the first time. Located in the Regency of Malang, East Java, the Singhasari temple marks the center of the Singhasari dynasty, which reigned from East Java in the thirteenth century. The kingdom of Singhasari was founded when a commoner, Ken Arok, married the princess Ken Dedes and overthrew the kingdom of Kediri.

Ken Dedes, widely known for her beauty, had been kidnapped and forced to marry Tunggal Ametung, king of Tumapel in the larger kingdom of Kediri. But Ken

Dedes's father cursed him, decreeing that Ken Dedes's beauty would be the cause of his demise. One day, the commoner Ken Arok saw Ken Dedes descend from the royal carriage. He caught a forbidden glimpse of her genitals and saw that they were shining. He was captivated by her beauty and took the sparkling as a sign that her children would rule. Ken Arok killed her husband Tunggal Ametung, took Ken Dedes as his wife, and launched a campaign against King Kertajaya of Kediri that would unify the region and found the Singhasari Kingdom. Ken Dedes is thus known as a perfect beauty, but also as a formidable kingmaker. Her name thus carries numerous associations, all powerful.

The original OM Kendedes was founded in 1976 in Jakarta, a dangdut band of five women—Titiek Nur, Ken Zuraida, Evy Martha, Rieza Anggoman, and Herlina Effendi—all of whom played instruments and sang. They eventually added additional members and released dozens of albums (Figure 66).



Figure 66: The album art for the first album by OM Kendedes. Image courtesy of Discogs.

OM New Kendedes, in a practice common in dangdut koplo, takes the name of the original group, adds the English word “new,” and maintains some structure of the original. It appears that the two groups have no association through management. The Kediri group saw the opportunity to model themselves on the group of the past. A band of all women is rare and drawing on the popularity of the original group would give audiences a frame of reference for accepting the new group. However, with their roots in Kediri, East Java, the new group also holds claim to the name Ken Dedes, as their city was part of the Singhasari kingdom and rests only a hundred kilometers from the temple. By taking the name New Kendedes, they reference the prestige and success of the original group and solidify their associations with East Javanese pride and powerful women.

Unlike the original group, OM New Kendedes follows the structure of dangdut koplo. Band members are not featured as singers; like other dangdut koplo groups, they hire singers by event. There are several singers who prefer to sing with OM New Kendedes above all other groups because they find working with a band of women to be much less threatening and stressful. Among these are Vivi Artika and Andra Kharisma.

Epep, the kendang player of OM New Kendedes, may be the most famous woman instrumentalist in Java. A shy, tomboyish presence, she fills her social media with recordings of her music rather than glamorous portraits. All the women in OM New Kendedes wear matching, sparkly clothes with short skirts for performances—men in OM rarely match at all, and when they do, they wear simple black collared shirts—but Epep hikes her skirts up so her drumkit fits between her legs, carefully draping the sides

of the skirt around her legs or covering them with a jacket to preserve some modesty. When not onstage, her clothing of choice is t-shirts, plaid shirts, ballcaps, and jeans.

Epep, who sometimes goes by Evi, was born and raised in Kediri. She started studying kendang in middle school, learning by ear and watching YouTube videos. She started performing not long after, while still in middle school. She laughs as she recalls that time: “I was still learning, but I already felt brave enough to accept jobs!”

Everything changed when New Kendedes was created in December of 2015 by Aglies Jaya Records in Kediri. The last several years have been a blur of travel for Epep as OM New Kendedes has gained significant fame across East and Central Java. At the time of fieldwork, OM New Kendedes was famous enough that Stasiun Dangdut, the premiere dangdut television show for East and Central Java, couldn't afford to bring them in as guest stars.

### *Artistry and Discrimination*

I met Epep in October of 2018. Nasha Aquila had been hired as a guest artist for an OM New Kendedes concert in Pati, Central Java, and I tagged along. When we arrived at the concert, night had fallen and the band was already onstage doing the soundcheck. They were dressed in pink sequined skirts and bows with silver sequined tops, outfits that rivaled even the singers themselves. Epep smiled as Nasha and I slipped over the backstage area to wait for her set. She'd taken off her shoes and placed a towel on her knee, ready to wipe up sweat and dry her hands. As the music played, she lowered her head, listening intently, hands resting on the drumhead at the ready (see Figure 67).



*Figure 67: Epep in Pati, Central Java, October 2018. Photos by the author.*

Playing kendang is strenuous physical work, not least of all because the kendang player usually also plays drumkit. Many kendang players have a designated team member who fans them to try and keep their hands cool. Kendang players also often acquire reputations for mystical power because of their ability to control crowds and the immense technical skill required to master the instrument. Famous male players, like Ki Slamet of OM New Pallapa, are the subject of mystical rumors; he never rehearses and never comes onstage the same way everyone else does, with the ladder, instead coming onstage from the back to protect his aura, one kendang player told me.

Epep, perhaps because of her youth and perhaps because she is a woman, seems to spark no such rumors. However, she does inspire devoted fans, and videos on her

YouTube channel playing kendang parts to popular songs often receive tens of thousands of views.

Epep told me that her favorite part of her work is the opportunity to travel, even though sometimes the physical work of playing was brutal.

Epep: My favorite thing is visiting so many different cities. I've found I'm happiest when I'm traveling. What's less pleasant—and understand, I have to go with what management says—is if there's a performance with lots and lots of difficult songs. That's hard on me.

As touring artists, the musicians of New Kendedes combine two challenging roles. Like other dangdut koplo musicians, they must master an extensive repertoire, play their instruments proficiently, and perform several shows a day. Unlike singers, they play all the sets. While singers get to rest after their three songs, the band plays for a full two to three hours each show. Unlike other orkes Melayu, Epep and the others put nearly as much effort into their appearances as singers. Their hair and makeup must be flawless, and they dress in matching glitzy outfits, often with short skirts and heels (Figure 68). They also dance, usually simple steps and kicks side-to-side, which, while a hallmark of Rhoma Irama's Soneta Group, is rarely done by male dangdut groups today. This additional responsibility—a labor of appearance in addition to musicianship—is a significant amount of work.





*Figure 68: The author (center back) with OM New Kendedes and Nasha Aquila. Pati, Central Java, October 2018.*

Discourse about OM New Kendedes, even from their manager, shows how the all-women group is often treated as a gimmick rather than as serious musicians. Articles and even their own press releases focus on their beauty rather than musicianship or other qualities. One 2019 article credits their popularity to their attractiveness [I. *daya tarik*], referencing tambourinist Novita's dance moves and devotes several more paragraphs to their costumes and makeup than to their sound (Hadi 2019). Despite this discourse, OM New Kendedes maintains a high level of musicianship.

Similarly, Epep sometimes faces bullying and discrimination, or outright confusion from fans, about her gender and sexuality. In her early years with OM New Kendedes, the over-the-top feminine attire and styling led fans to view her as feminine. Her abilities as a kendang player drew many loyal fans and headed off criticism that

kendang playing was not an appropriate activity for a woman. In recent years as Epep grown a fanbase in her own right, her self-presentation on social media sparks some comments about her appearance and lifestyle. Epep has a close relationship with the dangdut singer Cindy Marenta. They collaborate on new music, and Epep is present for most family events with Cindy and her two children from a previous marriage. Epep refers to Cindy's children as her own, and Cindy's children call Epep *tante*, or auntie. Fans have given a name to the duo: PepCin. While most of the comments on their posts are positive, many express confusion over Epep's gender presentation. When Epep posted a photo of herself wearing a black leather jacket and sitting astride a red Yamaha motorcycle (the post was sponsored by Yamaha), one commenter wrote, "You look feminine, but on your Youtube, you're changing car tires, you're painting the house and you're mowing the grass, you're masculine." Other comments were more direct. On a photo of Epep and Cindy posing together, a commenter wrote, "You're a lesbian [I. *tomboy*] and ignorant, so I would love you half dead."

Posts this direct are rare and seem targeted more at Epep's gender presentation and possible relationship with Cindy than the fact that she plays the dangdut kendang, an instrument gendered masculine in Indonesia. Epep's fandom quickly closes ranks to protect her safety and peace of mind. In addition to her own fan group, Epilovers, PepCin has developed their own following. Young men with "PepCin" in their Instagram handles stalk the comments on the photos, often calling out rude commenters and warning them that repeated rudeness will not be tolerated. Epep relies on her musical skill and the loyal

fandom built from it to stave off potential criticism of her gender presentation and sexuality.

Epep's position is explicitly feminist, and she remains firm despite the challenges of bullying, discrimination, and being asked to present differently onstage than she might perhaps choose herself. Epep holds out hope that simply having an all-women dangdut koplo group will inspire other young women. When I asked her about the distinction of being a woman kendang player, she responded:

Epep: I just hope I can show to all the other women and girls out there that we can also do anything that men usually do [laughs].

Though she is quite young, Epep's hopes have already had an impact, as even in the last few years young women kendang players have started to pop up on Instagram and YouTube. Epep makes it a point to follow, like, and support these younger women. While a dangdut koplo band of all women does not erase all boundaries, the example of Epep and OM New Kenedes has helped other women to see playing musical instruments as a possibility.

Mutik Nida: From Islamic Qasidah to Dangdut Koplo

Because all-women bands are extremely rare and mixed-gender bands are non-existent in dangdut koplo, some women instrumentalists take a different strategy. Rather than attempt to join or create an Orkes Melayu, Mutik Nida instead positions herself much like a singer. Traveling alone (or with her manager), she is hired by other bands to play and sing sets in their concert. She thus occupies a unique position, able to play kendang, sing, or both as the context requires. Following a stricter interpretation of Islam than most dangdut singers, playing the drum in addition to singing frees her from the

requirements of dancing and revealing clothing. Her voice and her playing, occurring simultaneously onstage, becomes a different kind of spectacle to replace a dangdut singer's command of the crowd: a spectacle of technical prowess.

Mutik Nida started her career in dangdut at eleven years old. She learned to play the kendang at least partly from a teacher, but she declined to name him or describe the nature of their relationship except that she says she sees him like a father. She started her career playing with qasidah groups. Indonesian qasidah, unlike Arabic qasidah, refers broadly to Islamic song, and often features an instrumental lineup not unlike dangdut. Some also feature violins or other string instruments reminiscent of orkes Gambus. Many all-woman qasidah groups exist in central Java, and some even play covers of dangdut songs, with the lyrics adjusted to be more explicitly Islamic. The all-women qasidah group Qasima, who advertises themselves as qasidah with *irama Melayu*, or Malay rhythm, a reference to dangdut, went viral in 2018 for playing a cover of Nella Kharisma's hit "Jarang Goyang." It is then not so surprising that Mutik Nida studied kendang in this tradition before pivoting to a solo career in dangdut koplo. Even after embarking on a solo career, she occasionally performed with a Qasidah group she named MNC, Mutik Nida Club, featuring mostly women with a few men on backup guitar and bass. Such all-women environments enable creative exploration for young women, as Cecilia Björck has argued, by offering a brief escape from a gendered gaze, competition, and distraction (Björck 2013). In Indonesia, where gender segregation in leisure activities is stark, this is even more the case. However, young women who pivot to professional

music careers must make a choice about how their gendered body will move in industry spaces.

*Between Artis and Musician, Between Qasidah and Koplo*

The crowd was packed and rowdy when Nanang and I arrived at Mutik Nida's concert in Pasuruan in late August. She was playing with the band D&R Music. I was at home in Surabaya when Nanang texted me earlier that night, and I rushed to meet him in Pasuruan. We were late and had to park several hundred meters from the concert. Already entranced by the music, the crowd hardly reacted to my strange *bule* body in their space. Nanang pushed through to the front of the stage.

Mutik Nida was not playing when we finally got to the stage. She was waiting for her turn. I noticed right away that she was sitting in a strange place. Not in the singer's corner, and not truly with the band, Mutik Nida sat in front of the drummer, feet propped up on an equipment box, boxes of saweran strewn nearby (Figure 69). I had only ever seen MCs sit in that position before. But unlike MCs, her energy was not directed at the audience, not busy catering to others. She focused inward with eyes downcast, as though listening intently for something or studiously trying to avoid unwanted attention. Singers would never sit out in the open that way, but band members never got enough time to rest to sit there either. In her beautiful, brightly colored clothes, she was like a beacon of strangeness in that position.



*Figure 69: Mutik Nida sits in front of the drumkit, waiting to perform. Photo by the author.*

When she finally stood to play, she kept us in suspense. The regular band drummer began the song—a normal phenomenon in dangdut koplo, in which the kendang drum usually does not enter until the second verse. Mutik Nida slowly rose and approached her kendang set, which was rigged in a position to allow her to stand



downstage from the other drummer (Figure 70). She rose from her perch as the first verse closed and the flute player played the interlude. Just in time she raised her fingers to the drums and played the entrance assertively, her long cutaway dress flowing with her movements.



*Figure 70: The author attempting to play kendang. In this photo, the position of Mutik Nida's kit in front of the drumkit can be seen. Photo courtesy of Mutik Nida.*

Her performance on the kendang was awe-inspiring, but we had yet to reach the climax of the show: Mutik Nida singing her signature song, “Payung Hitam,”<sup>44</sup> while playing the kendang. She began by singing the *bawa*, the introduction to the song, which

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<sup>44</sup> “Payung Hitam,” or “The Black Umbrella,” is also Lesty’s signature song as described in Chapter 4. Because of its difficulty and emotive resonance, this song is one of the most popular in dangdut and often included in the koplo repertoire.

is slow and unmeasured. Her voice was clear and full of emotion. At the end of the *bawa*, she began to sing the first verse, setting the tempo with her voice before her fingers tapped those first kendang beats. From there she was off, her voice ascending in the extremely challenging *cengkok* while her shoulders and arms undulated, the beat never-ending, performing the two most challenging roles in dangdut koplo at once.

In 2018, when I met her, Mutik Nida's career was booming. She was 24 years old and exhilarated from a recent appearance on the national talk show *Hitam/Putih* in Jakarta, perhaps the most viewed and respected talk show in Indonesia. Because of her expanding fame, she was charging a minimum of one million rupiah, about seventy U.S. dollars at the time, for local performances, and much more for others.

Mutik Nida has charted her own path for dangdut koplo success, but her uniquely liminal position—not singer or instrumentalist, but something else entirely—forces her to use different strategies. Unlike most singers, Mutik Nida cannot *ngropel*, or perform multiple shows in a day. She can do two shows per day if they are close, but not more than that, because her fingers get sore and stiff from playing, and, unlike singers, she has to move equipment in addition to her body. She must be dressed beautifully in elaborate, rich clothing, but she does not get the release of sitting in the back corner, hidden from view, to touch up her appearance. She also cannot have long nails, since they get in the way of the action of her left hand. Mutik Nida negotiates a middle ground in which audiences expect her to have the beauty, charm, and charisma of a dangdut singer, but many of the traditional avenues, like dance, are not open to her. Instead, she charts her own course, the movements of her arms and fingers becoming their own hypnotic dance,



the dangdut singer's open expression and banter replaced by an expression of absolute focus.

### *Dangdut Koplo and Religion*

Mutik Nida came to dangdut koplo through qasidah. This underscores her commitment to Islam. While the vast majority of dangdut singers identify as Muslim, very few wear the hijab, especially during performance. As I describe in Chapter 1, the archetype of the woman who sings and dances does not usually leave room for extremely visible Islamic piety. Rather, it encourages a kind of syncretic Islam which Geertz saw as part and parcel with *abangan* practice. While most singers are devoted to Islamic identity and whole-heartedly celebrate Islamic holidays, they are less likely to pray five times a day or to wear a hijab, which has become a clearer marker of difference in the last twenty years in Indonesia, as the use of head coverings has spiked exponentially.

Moving from qasidah to dangdut koplo marks Mutik Nida as different in religious ways as well as artistic ones. While she has certainly developed a koplo following, much of her fan base remains more strictly Islamic than the average dangdut koplo fan, and so she faces different expectations. When she played a concert with singer Desy Thata, a Central Javanese singer known for erotic performance, Desy Thata sang "Ora Jodo," gyrating on the stage, her short skirt revealing short black Spanx underneath. Mutik Nida played the kendang, standing behind Desy Thata. When Mutik Nida posted a photo with Desy Thata from the event on Instagram, the outcry from her followers was immediate and targeted Mutik Nida's piety and purity. Within a day, she had taken down the post and disabled comments on the YouTube videos of the performance.

From time to time, Mutik Nida deliberately plays into the narratives of her more religious fanbase, who, as a whole, tend to be more nationalist and anti-imperial than their *abangan* neighbors. Of everyone I interviewed, she was the most suspicious of my motives. After our meeting, she posted a photo of us together on Instagram. The caption questioned whether there were ulterior motives in my desire to learn about dangdut. She saw me as a foreign interloper. “If a foreigner comes to you to ask about your art and skills, don’t go to them. Make them come to you,” she concluded the post. “You have the knowledge. Make them show you respect. And make sure, whatever they write, that they publish it in Indonesian too.” Despite agreeing wholeheartedly with her position on the subject, I have yet to fully win her over.

Mutik Nida represents a remarkable step for women musicians, but her example also illustrates some of the challenges of breaking the stereotypes. Her background in *qasidah* provided formal training in her instrument, something from which most women are barred. Her religious trappings protect her reputation and allow her to cross over between two musical genres. However, that religious background and position also means she is held to a higher standard than other dangdut singers, her choices more closely scrutinized.

#### Women Musicians in the Indonesian Context

Both Mutik Nida and Epep New Kenedes face heightened scrutiny for their roles as musicians. This fact parallels what feminist ethnomusicologists, popular music scholars, and music educators have written about women and musical instruments for decades. Harold Abeles and Susan Porter pointed out as early as 1978 how sex-

stereotyped instruments resulted in limitations on women's careers in music. Ellen Koskoff writes, "although all performance may be regarded as a locus of power, performance on musical instruments is often bound up with cultural notions of gender and control in ways that vocal performance is not" (Koskoff 1995:114). Veronica Doubleday argues that this association may stem from instruments' position outside the physical body; the material, human-built musical instruments have relationships to the bodies that create, hold, and play them, while the voice, which emerges from inside the body, can be dismissed as natural. Doubleday writes, "women frequently experience 'negative' relationships with instruments, being deterred from contact with them" (2008:19), and few instruments are associated with women exclusively. When women do play instruments in professional contexts, they often can only do so as long as their performance is rendered pleasing to men and so acceptable. "The shock value of sexually attractive women uniformly dressed in eye-catching novelty costumes playing 'men's instruments' draws attention, and has made for commercial success" (2008:22). This last point is certainly salient for OM New Kenedes; their elaborate costumes, choreography, and marketing all emphasize their beauty, femininity, and the shock value of beautiful women playing instruments.

For Mutik Nida, criticism more often centered on whether or not her self-presentation as a pious Muslim was hypocritical in her performance with dangdut koplo groups. As discussed in Chapter 2, dangdut singers usually deftly sidestep this question by not portraying themselves as pious or by separating the realms of entertainment and religion. By bringing religiosity into her performance through her clothing, training

background, and social media discourse, Mutik Nida becomes vulnerable to such accusations. Curiously, as (male) Islamic thinkers have long ascribed negative powers to musical instruments, Mutik Nida's performance as a musician does not feature in these criticisms. As Doubleday (1999) has pointed out, frame drum performance in the Middle East is considered to be women's domain, and so perhaps the image of a pious-presenting woman drummer is not considered as unusual as a non-pious one. Her background in all-women *qasidah* may also render her performance legible to audiences.

While professional women musicians in *dangdut koplo* remain objects of curiosity and scrutiny, social media and YouTube have significantly opened up the possibilities for young women who want to play instruments. Many young fans use smartphone apps to practice drum beats and mixing, and YouTube tutorials teach the basics to anyone who can find or borrow an instrument. Perhaps most importantly, engaging with professionals like Epep on social media allows them to imagine themselves as musicians and easily reach a fanbase on their own terms.

### **MCs, Presenters, and Pembawa Acara**

The role of MC in Indonesia and particularly in Java is a special one. Variously called Masters of Ceremony, presenters, and *pembawa acara* [E. MC], the career paths for these glitzy, polished public speakers are varied and in high demand. On television and off, MCs are responsible for the success or failure of an event. Off-air, they are in demand for weddings, circumcisions, business meetings, university events—any celebration, really, requires at least two MCs, usually one woman and one man, dressed to the nines, talking into microphones, bantering and joking in between speeches and

ceremonial moments in a steady stream of conversation. Many music and arts groups have a dedicated single MC; dangdut groups almost always have their own, and wayang kulit performances often have an MC to guide the event in addition to the *dhalang* puppeteer. On television, MCs do much more than read cue cards and provide transitions to the next guest or song. Often unscripted, MCs create the games, gimmicks, and questions for guests or contestants themselves on the spot. They are called upon to fill time by performing tricks, songs, or jokes. If a season of a show is unsuccessful, audiences often blame a mediocre MC. For example, the first season of *Liga Dangdut* on Indosiar had five designated MCs. Audiences complained that one, Arie Kriting, had too low energy, and that ruined the atmosphere of the show. He was not hired back.

The power over events that audiences grant to MCs in discourse cannot be overstated. Like singers and kendang players, MCs are often spoken of as having supernatural power to attract others and make them listen [I. *daya tarik* or *tarik massa*]. Discourse about them often focuses on the voice. Dhadana Adi, a writer and journalist from Surabaya, theorized that this was perhaps connected to nationalized media throughout the twentieth century. In those days, the government spoke with one voice, he said, and there weren't all these options. Another contact imagined that perhaps it had something to do with the clowns of Javanese puppet theatre. Most audience members' favorite part of the night, these jokesters provide a relief from the drama when they emerge to joke and comment about the action. I am not wholly convinced by either argument, especially considering that other Southeast Asian nations have similar traditions. Regardless of the origin of the significance of MCs, they are some of the most

visible figures in dangdut koplo. While touring koplo bands rarely hire women as their designated MC (New Monata and New Kendedes are notable exceptions), women are often MCs in other contexts both on television and off-air.

#### Lenny at *Stasiun Dangdut*

I first met Lenny in April 2018, and we quickly became good friends. She is one of the most famous faces of dangdut koplo in East Java because of her position as the longest-working MC for the television show *Stasiun Dangdut*, staple in many households.

Like many MCs, Lenny began her career as a singer. I discuss that part of her background in more depth in Chapter 2. As a summary, Lenny was born in Surabaya to a non-musical family. From a young age, she was crazy about singing, and by middle school she was the singer of band called Karang Taruna. She continued to have local success, even touring to Darwin, Australia with a Pesona Indonesia event. She parleyed that success into guest appearances on Jakarta dangdut shows. She was then invited by a producer to record an album, but he cheated her, stealing money meant for album promotion. Having footed the bill for song rights, recording, and promotion, and getting very little back, Lenny returned to Surabaya, where a friend who worked for *Stasiun Dangdut* at JTV offered to help her promote her new album.

Lenny spent a year without performing after that experience to do some soul-searching and recover. She worked as a hostess for a dangdut club in the infamous red light district Dolly, which, although she was in a managerial position, she saw as a last resort. When she learned about an audition for an MC position at *Stasiun Dangdut* from

that same friend who was a producer on the show, she immediately saw the virtue of the opportunity. She auditioned with the MC at the time on January 1, and the very next day was on air live.

*The Work of an MC: “Communicative with the Audience”*

Lenny’s work at *Stasiun Dangdut* began at about 10:30am each day. She would park at the Graha Pena building in south Surabaya and make her way past the security guards to her dressing room, where she would change clothes and apply makeup. She coordinated her outfit with Candra ahead of time to make sure they would not clash.

*Stasiun Dangdut* offered to provide wardrobe, but Lenny usually refused, preferring to find her own clothes. When I asked her about the time and effort she dedicated to clothing and makeup, she responded,

Lenny: The outfits I wear each day, I find them myself by looking for sponsors. I’ll go to the mall, walk around, and each time I go in I’ll ask for the manager, have a chat, tell them I’m with *Stasiun Dangdut*. I tell them myself, I like that outfit. If I let JTV buy for me, it’s never quite right, it doesn’t work, and then later I’m worried when I’m on air. Maybe it’s too small, maybe too big, maybe the color is like, what is this? And then when I’m on air, everyone can tell my mood isn’t right. No matter what I’m saying, my thoughts aren’t there. If I’m thinking about my clothes, no. The packaging has to be right first. We’re ready, looking pretty, already had food, already checked, that feels good. In that case, even if something doesn’t go right later, your partner says something or other, I can still tolerate anything if I look good. It has an influence. So I find it for myself, I pick for myself. I talk to the manager and ask whether they want to work with me, and we barter. I propose, I’ll borrow this outfit, because it fits my taste, and later on JTV we’ll write the name of your store, it’ll be shown at the end of each show, or I could even say the name myself, just give me your card.

Lenny finds six outfits in this manner each week, a significant amount of outside labor.

Lenny did most of her own makeup herself as well, occasionally asking a staff member backstage to help with details or with pressing her clothes (Figure 71).



*Figure 71: Lenny getting ready in the dressing room at Stasiun Dangdut. Photo by the author.*

Once ready, usually about fifteen minutes before the noon start time, Lenny goes to the sound stage, where seats for the MCs are set up behind the video feed and cameras. Lenny would listen to the soundcheck, chat with Gita about the rundown for the show, and post to her social media feed. When waiting for their segments, all the presenters sat on the sidelines that way, heads in their phones, obsessively checking social media feeds, as Lenny does in Figure 72 below.



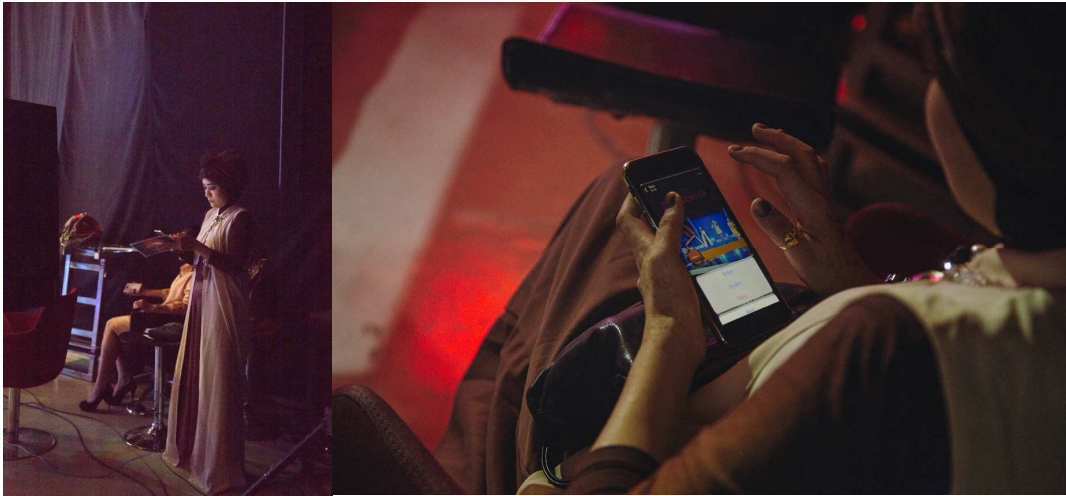


Figure 72: Lenny checking her phone while on breaks at Stasiun Dangdut. Photos by the author.

Lenny is famous and widely recognized. She parleys her fame on *Stasiun Dangdut* into off-air MC jobs at weddings, circumcisions, and business events, highly profitable work. She has the opportunity to travel all over Indonesia. However, being a presenter did not always come easy to her. She had developed her skills over years of experience. Communication is key to her method. “The day I auditioned,” Lenny told me,

Lenny: The producer invited both of us [her and the man who was already an MC] to hang out together. Why did the producer do that? So that I would know, oh... honestly, this is like me inviting you out today. Imagine we were at an audition and invited to go out and travel together. It's so I'd know you, and you'd know me. Oh, Andrea usually talks like this, she's comfortable with this, so that we'd be familiar later, so that in front of the camera we're not stiff and unsure. So that we're already comfortable. That was on the first of January, and on the second we were already on air live.

Lenny told me this story as we rumbled across town in her SUV, classic rock thrumming quietly on the radio. I had scheduled an appointment for an interview with her, but she was doing everything in her power to avoid the stifling formality of an interview. She'd taken me to her favorite *ketoprak* place for lunch, just down the street from the Graha Pena building where *Stasiun Dangdut* aired. Next, she'd declared, we

were going to see a movie at the budget theater in a mall across town. If I had questions to ask, I could ask them in the car.

This was a common issue I had with setting up my research. Many dangdut professionals, especially those who had not attended university, found formal interviews bizarre and eschewed them in favor of deep hanging out. Unlike singers who simply found interviews awkward (or found my nervousness off-putting), Lenny in particular gave off an air of not caring about impressing me or following my lead. She took command of the situation, showing her years of experience courting industry professionals and patrons with more clout than me. She casually invited me on vacations and proposed we drink wine and shop together. And unlike singers, Lenny explained her reasoning for favoring casual hangouts over formal interviews. Just like that producer years before had wanted to see her interact with the other MC in a casual setting to get a sense of her communicative style, so Lenny wanted to develop a relationship with me and get me to drop my overly formal persona before she answered my questions.

I bring this up because it relates to Lenny's central MCing philosophy and a technique that made her effective as a singer. She explained to me on that car ride through Surabaya.

Andrea: When you MC, the words are always spontaneous, yes? There's no script?

Lenny: Yes, it's never prescribed. Gita, for example, will give only these instructions: "Segment 2 will be presenters." Just with that, we're ready, and that's totally normal. At the most, we'll read the outline once and add whatever we want ourselves.

Andrea: Honestly, that freaks me out.

Lenny: Just because you're not used to it. You just try having fourteen years' experience—you don't even need fourteen, just with five, and it would already be normal to you too, no matter the context. Sure, you'd have trouble at first, because

you've never done it before, but once you've done it, you're forced to improve, and I'm sure you could get it on your own.

Andrea: How did you learn?

Lenny: Time. It just takes time. Twenty-one years, Andrea, and still sometimes the conversation with a partner doesn't emerge naturally. What I say, what they say, as long as a year or more, but eventually we can talk smoothly, we can bait responses and give set ups and everything will flow. For me, it takes a full year. It's not easy for me. I didn't go to school. My only school was experience. I started with singing, and I wouldn't just sing, I'd practice introducing the next singer, "Next up is Lenny," like that. I didn't just take the mic and sing. I was always communicative with the audience. That's the basics. I can chat and joke. They don't just want to listen; if they just wanted to listen, they could buy the cassette tape. You have to be communicative with the audience.

Andrea: It's true, sometimes I see singers who are good at chatting with the audience, and I see some who aren't as good. Usually the better or more successful singers are the ones who are—

Lenny: Who are communicative! It really is like that. The best singers, they entertain, they make people laugh, and every event they come to, they make it truly alive.

Lenny's motivation to practice small talk with audience members, even when she was a primarily singer, prepared her for a career as an MC. As discussed above, MCs are granted more power and responsibility in Indonesia than their counterparts in the U.S. and Europe. All kinds of events, from birthday parties to company meetings, hire MCs, usually at least two, and the MCs are held responsible for the success of the event. With no script, MCs are expected to entertain on the spot with spontaneous jokes and gimmicks, while still being aware of the necessary progression of events, who deserved shows of respect, etc. (Figure 73).



*Figure 73: Lenny, on the left, jokes with her fellow MCs on air at Stasiun Dangdut. Photo by the author.*

For Lenny, two main skills were paramount. The first is commanding the attention and the emotions of the audience. The second, and perhaps more important in Lenny's estimation, is jiving well with a partner MC, setting them up for jokes and keeping the conversation flowing. In spite of my best efforts, I never fully understood the aesthetic judgements Lenny made about the quality of her presenting. When something went badly, I often did not notice until the presenters were off the stage again, sitting sullenly. While I imagined an energetic presence to be a positive thing in an MC, Lenny told me that was not always the case. Overly energetic or domineering MCs eat up everyone else's energy and prevent team cooperation.

I noticed a gendered component to Lenny's expectations of good MC technique. She focused on her partnership and on setting up her co-MC for jokes. She also

acknowledged that that often meant she had to take a supporting role. In this passage, she explains how producers selected good MC partners for her.

Lenny: After my first MC partner passed, they changed my partners often. Sometimes Dian, sometimes the younger brother of my old partner. [...] but it still didn't work, because they weren't used to it, so we weren't yet a pair. With my old partner, he was a little *gemulai*.<sup>45</sup> If I felt it myself—you can tell. I mean, I can tell for myself what I'm like and who I can keep up a conversation with. It's easy to see. Even viewers know, Lenny fits best when combined with a presenter who is a man that's, that's a *banci*. They know, don't feature this man, not this one, because maybe he's a genuine man [I. *laki-laki tulen*]. But maybe, because we've already talked together a lot, when we're on air, we already know, this person is like this.

She went on, explaining the signs that MCs did not fit well together. Producers had tried to add a third MC to the show, and both Lenny and Chandra had been dissatisfied with the results. In this passage, Lenny explains why the third MC, Dian,<sup>46</sup> was unsatisfactory.

Lenny: Now, about Dian. Candra often complained to me that Dian's conversation style didn't match up with ours. She would always talk first, or wear the wrong thing. She was too dominant [I. *dominan*], like she wanted to perform on her own. Really, it should be Candra. I already know, Candra is not the type of person who will back down [I. *dikalalah*]. That's just the type of person he is. I know you know Candra likes to be *diumpan*. Do you know what that means, *diumpan*? If we're talking on air, he likes to be given set ups, he likes to be baited for jokes. He doesn't want to give up the spotlight to someone else. But since I understand that about him, and because I care about him, when I'm talking with him, I'm more—even though Candra sometimes expects people to be puppets, I don't know, I can deal with it. I've worked it out with him, and we're already a team. Maybe because he's an orphan, maybe because we've spent a lot of time together, maybe because he's a *banci*, yeah, *gemulai*, maybe because of that. If he wants to do somersaults, wants to be number one, go ahead. But Dian couldn't do it.

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<sup>45</sup> Lenny used the word *gemulai*, which roughly translates as swaying or supple, to refer to effeminateness. She later uses the word *banci* to describe the same person. The term *banci* often refers to trans women in Indonesia, but sometimes is also used to refer to gay men or men perceived as effeminate.

<sup>46</sup> Name changed.

Lenny's discussion of good MC attributes struck me for two reasons. The first is the casualness with which she discussed queer attributes and how she considered them common enough in MCs to be a sought-after type, even for ostensibly conservative producers. The second is the way that Lenny describes taking a backseat to Candra with characteristics of nurturing and supporting. Lenny is Candra's senior in every way, but rather than expecting his respect, she explains her actions towards him in stereotypically feminine terms, almost like a mother for a child. By doing so, she reclaims some power in their relationship. She is willing to step back from the spotlight because of her greater awareness of his needs and ability to fill different roles.

Lenny acknowledged that, in her heart, she still preferred singing to the work of being an MC. She sang at every opportunity, often doing guest performances on *Stasiun Dangdut*, traveling to compete in singing competitions, and, most frequently, posting herself singing on Instagram. She would record herself singing in the dressing rooms or in her car, where she said the acoustics were particularly good. She invited me and Candra to sing along and would work at these short videos with the fervor of a perfectionist. Using her contacts in the television and music industries, she filled her YouTube channel with professional-looking music videos. At the same time, her career as an MC enables her to reach a wide audience and avoid depending on singing for all her financial support. Although her career as a solo singer has yet to take off, being an MC has provided her with both financial stability and artistic opportunity.

## MCs and Formal Education

MCs, presenters, and hosts play a crucial role in dangdut industries beyond television. Orkes Melayu usually have their own MCs. Events like weddings might require at least two MCs: an event MC like Lenny and an MC that travels with the band. Event and television MCs increasingly have studied formally to prepare for their jobs, usually majoring in communications or broadcasting. As Lenny's example shows, a degree is not a pre-requisite to be an MC for dangdut koplo events, and skill remains an important component. Unlike with producers, as I discuss in the following section, MCs who come to dangdut industries with degrees in broadcast journalism or communications are rarely as successful in dangdut koplo industries as Lenny, who must know singers, bands, and songs, and be able to sing on the spot.

## **Women Who Come to Dangdut Careers through Education**

### Mass Media in Post-New Order Indonesia

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>47</sup> television and radio producers—both men and women—are usually university educated and do not come to dangdut television as fans of dangdut. Instead, they get internships through their undergraduate institution or technical high school, find themselves assigned to a dangdut show or station, and eventually grow to appreciate the music. They usually come from middle-class backgrounds and see themselves as coming from a distinctly separate socio-economic class from their viewers and listeners. By virtue of their education and the professional organizations to which they belong, television producers and radio hosts I interviewed tended to replicate a

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<sup>47</sup> An earlier draft of this data appeared in Decker 2020.

particular discursive framework, one which mirrored New Order discourse surrounding mass media and one most singers and managers tended to wholeheartedly reject.

Radio and television are both significant mediums for dangdut koplo, but they are also both tied to identity and nation in Indonesia. Radio broadcasting is significant because despite histories of state monopoly, radio also “has a strong tradition as a local community activity” (Lindsay 1997:105). Peter Kaan argues that radio broadcasting between 1927 and 1942 was integral to the development of nationalist identity politics in response to Dutch colonialism (2017:8). Brian Larkin (2008) observes a similar phenomenon in British colonies. The Dutch began to broadcast from Holland in 1933 on the PHOHI (Philips Omroep Holland Indië, or Philips Broadcasting Company Holland Indies), and a year later had set up the Netherlands Radio Omroep Maatschappij (Netherlands Indies Radio Broadcasting), or NIROM, broadcasting from Batavia (Jakarta), which in 1939 featured music as eighty-one percent of its broadcast (Mrázek 1997:21). Rudolf Mrázek argues, “Indies radio became a tool to define a modern colonial space” (1997:9). Vincent Kuitenbrouwer argues that the PHOHI target mainly colonial expats and analyzes the “role of radio as an intercontinental medium intended to promote a form of ‘Dutchness’” (Kuitenbrouwer 2016:84). However, local radio clubs had been broadcasting since the early twenties (Kaan 2017:14), unlike the Dutch station from Holland, NIROM provided a platform for local broadcasting clubs (Kuitenbrouwer 2016:84), and, as Philip Yampolsky argues, many among the Indigenous and Indo bureaucratic class used gramophones, recordings, and radio to demonstrate social class standing (Yampolsky 2013:33). Scholars still debate whether radio was instrumental in



creating a national consciousness during this period; Yampolsky posits that it may have at least created a sense of shared experience (2013:44), while Mrázek shows how “[becoming] radio mechanics” functioned as a metaphor for the nation “[coming] out in the world” (Mrázek 1997:32–3).

In 1942, the Japanese occupied Indonesia and took over all radio stations (Lindsay 1997:106), and on August 17, 1945, when Sukarno declared independence, he did so via radio, earning Indonesia the nickname the microphone republic, Sukarno the people’s tongue [I. *peyambung lidah rakyat*] (McDaniel 1994:214–5). According to Edwin Jurriëns, Sukarno maintained the monopoly set up by the Japanese, creating RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia). During the Suharto era, “RRI retained its monopoly on news production but lost its popularity to the hundreds of private radio stations that had been officially allowed to become its competitors. After the fall of Suharto in 1998 and during the successive era of social and political reform (Reformasi), regulations to obtain broadcasting licenses relaxed and the number of private radio stations in Indonesia skyrocketed to more than one thousand” (Jurriëns 2009:12). Unlike television, radio sets have long been inexpensive to purchase and carry; similarly, community or hobby radio stations are relatively easy to create. For these reasons, radio in Indonesia has long felt closer to the people than television, though it is similarly marked by conflicts between the official, government stations and commercial or community ones.

Television similarly shaped national discourse during a point of political upheaval. As Philip Kitley wrote shortly after the New Order’s collapse, the New Order viewed Indonesian television as part of a “national culture project” (2000:3), defined as

state-sponsored and controlled activities with the goal of constructing and legitimating Indonesian culture. He writes, “Under the New Order, the national culture project can be understood as three entwined processes of cultural denial, affirmation, and invention, which together have attempted to map a unitary and unifying cultural identity across the territory (2000:4). In other words, the New Order saw Indonesian culture as something that could be constructed via mass media, and did so by rejecting some practices, integrating some into mass media, and inventing some others wholesale. I will return to this argument as I analyze women’s conceptions of their own roles and responsibilities in mass media careers in dangdut in the post-New Order era, as well as in the Conclusion, in which I show how these narratives still permeate dangdut singing competitions in Jakarta, setting up an ideological conflict between working and touring dangdut singers and musicians and the vision for dangdut espoused by producers and government officials.

Returning to women’s lives in dangdut koplo, I will discuss two professional women in this section. The first, Ika, is director of musical programming at the Surabaya dangdut radio station Radio Wijaya. The second, Gita, is the producer of the dangdut show *Stasiun Dangdut*, which airs throughout East and Central Java every day except Friday on the station JTV at noon. While their jobs are very different, both women share similar backgrounds—middle-class, East Javanese, university-educated—which gives them a similar perspective on dangdut audiences and industries. Both women see themselves as outsiders to dangdut, distinct and separate from dangdut’s fandom, who struggle to reconcile two responsibilities in their work: the responsibility to make their

medium financially successful, and a moral responsibility to protect audiences from lewd or crude content.

### Radio in Surabaya

The city of Surabaya has a special relationship with the medium of radio. Ever since Bung Tomo (Sutomo) broadcast a call that started the Battle of Surabaya in October and November of 1945 from Jalan Mawar, not two hundred meters from where I lived in Central Surabaya, radio has represented for Surabayans the voice of the people.<sup>48</sup> Even the state limits placed on radio during the Suharto era could not dampen this enthusiasm, as Dhahana Adi, a radio broadcaster and novelist from Surabaya told me.

“There are two types of radio: government and private. The government radio is RRI Surabaya (Radio Republik Indonesia). But there are many more private stations today.” RRI developed from the infrastructure and workforce left by NIROM, he told me.

The government station—he used the word *pemerintah* when specifying that station—has existed consistently since Independence. As stated above, though entertainment stations existed throughout the New Order, news journalism is relatively new to other radio stations. Suara Surabaya is notable for having quickly developed professionalism and a wide listenership.

“If someone steals a motorbike,” Dhahana Adi said, “people call Suara Surabaya first, before they even call the police.”

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<sup>48</sup> William H. Frederick’s stirring memorium of Sutomo in 1982 includes the following tribute: “He galvanized thousands of Indonesians to action with the distinctive, emotional speaking-style of his radio broadcasts, opening with the cry ‘Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!’ Though the battle for Surabaya was lost, it was never forgotten. November 10, 1945, became a precious moment in the revolution, and was later celebrated as Heroes’ Day” (1982:127).

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it’s more effective. The radio station can get the call out right away, and, before you know it, people have found and returned the motorbike. People hear radio broadcast first.”

Astuti and Aritonang (2019) note a high level of interactivity between Surabayan radio stations and their audiences, which reflect the overall level of audience engagement. While, unlike Suara Surabaya, dangdut stations prioritize music over reporting news, dangdut radio similarly maintains an important role in daily life, holding fast against both television and new media like YouTube.

Dhahana Adi explained to me how the business of private radio stations had gone since Reformasi.

Dhahana Adi: Most of the private radio stations are part of a group. One management group covers several different stations.

Andrea: Oh really?

Dhahana Adi: In Surabaya, the oldest, longest-standing one, as far as I know, is Suzana Radio Management. It includes: EBS FM, Suzana FM, Media FM, Merdeka FM, MTB FM, Strato FM, and Suara Giri FM. All their audiences are different segments of the population.

Andrea: Suara Giri is a dangdut radio station, right?

Dhahana Adi: Those are all the stations that still exist. And yes, it’s the only dangdut station in Gresik. Radio Suzana is the oldest of these. MTB FM plays mostly *tembang Jawa* (*campursari* or *langgam Jawa*).

Dhahana Adi here describes segmentation, a common broadcasting technique of identifying a narrow, easily packaged audience base for advertisers (Lindsay 1997:117). I was struck by the fact that most of these segmented stations are owned by a parent conglomerate. Segmentation thus represents a targeted strategy to reach increasingly narrow audiences, but as many of them as possible. As I will show below, Ika of Radio

Wijaya expresses some of the tensions associated with such segmentation, especially when considered in tandem with the remnants of Suharto-era discourse about broadcasting and socio-class issues surrounding dangdut audiences.

Ika at Radio Wijaya

I had been in the north section of Surabaya looking for the Chinese temple Hong Tiek Hian when my landlady Susi<sup>49</sup> called excitedly. A well-educated Javanese woman married to a Syrian immigrant, she spoke to me in English.

“Andrea, can you visit the radio station now? My friend is ready.”

Weeks before, she’d learned I was living in Surabaya to research dangdut. She’d laughed excitedly and told me, with a hint of conspiracy in her voice, that she’d worked at a dangdut radio station for years before leaving to raise her new baby. She promised to take me there, and I’d thought little of it since.

“She’s ready now! Can you leave?” she asked.

Relieved that I had not planned anything else for the day and that I had a voice recorder in my bag, I told her I was already close to the radio station. We agreed to meet there.

I could hear the music pulsing from outside the white three-story building as Susi, her young daughter, and I approached the gate. Ika came to let us in. Casually dressed in a loose black cotton blouse, light jeans, colorful woven bracelets, and a silky hijab patterned with blue, white, and green flowers, she looked relaxed—fittingly, because she appeared to be the only person working that afternoon. We followed her back into the

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<sup>49</sup> Name changed at her request.

building, which on the first floor seemed to consist mainly of two rooms separated by a glass barrier. In the back room was a desk, several computer monitors, two microphones, and mixing equipment. Inside, the music blared, as though the interior sound of the station were being broadcast, necessitating the speakers to be at full volume. Throughout our conversation, Ika did not pause to speak to listeners, but from time to time she clicked around on the computer screen, ostensibly moving around songs in her playlist and pre-recorded advertisements (Figure 74). I was struck by the difference between this station set up and the more middle-class Suara Surabaya, which I'd visited several months before. While Suara Surabaya's studio included several rooms, many broadcasting or recording simultaneously, as well as offices and cubicles for staff to brainstorm and plan, Radio Wijaya had only two rooms and one staff member, and the technology appeared much simpler.



*Figure 74: Ika working at the broadcasting station at Radio Wijaya. Photo by the author.*

Ika and I sat down to talk over the din of the music. Susi and her little girl wandered between rooms, joining us from time to time.

Ika was born in Surabaya and lived for a time in Padang, West Sumatra, during her youngest days, because of her parent's work. She and her family moved back to Surabaya when she started middle school (SMP). She attended high school in Surabaya before studying Indonesian and English literature at UNAIR (Universitas Airlangga, the prestigious public university in Surabaya). While studying, she interned at Radio Wijaya for three months, and after she graduated, they offered her a job. In 2006, she left, only to be rehired in 2007 to handle dangdut. Today she is the music director as well as a DJ.

According to Susi and Ika, Radio Wijaya became successful because the original owner boldly committed to full dangdut programming. Later, other local radio stations began to imitate their model.

Susi: [In English] After this radio start, we were in the first hiring, because actually that time, in the era where people underestimated dangdut, but the former boss has continuous to decide that they block the program full dangdut. Some people said ah, you will not get advertisement with this. But actually, it's almost in. So after that time, some other radio start forming this program.

At the start, Ika did not particularly like dangdut. She did not seek out dangdut programming in particular. When I asked whether she'd liked dangdut before working in the industry, she responded:

Ika: [In English] Actually not. But like or dislike, I still love it, [switching to Indonesian], because this is my work, and this takes up my time every day.

Susi: [In Indonesian, directed to Ika] Why were you assigned to dangdut all those years ago?

Ika: Because at that time no one else was interested in doing dangdut.

In 2006, Ika had the opportunity to move to a national news radio station. She discovered, however, that she didn't have a passion for news. She much preferred entertaining. When the new boss of Radio Wijaya approached her to come back in a leadership position, she agreed.

### *Programming and Keeping up with Trends*

At the time of the interview, Ika was the music director for Radio Wijaya. Because she is in charge of programming, her duties go far beyond her own segment. As mentioned above, Radio Wijaya's format is full dangdut. However, dangdut program is separated into three categories with corresponding segments: Dangdut nostalgia, disco dangdut, and dangdut hits.



Ika: There are three types. [continuing in Indonesian] Dangdut hits, dangdut nostalgia, and disco dangdut, divided up appropriately based on the time of day. At a time like right now, we play dangdut nostalgia. Mid-morning to early afternoon. Later in the afternoon, dangdut hits. Later in the evening and at night, it's time for disco dangdut.

As I will review later, this is in keeping with beliefs about target audience. In addition to programming, Ika organizes where tracks come from, edits them to fit with Radio Wijaya's technology, keeps up with the latest trends, and fields requests. In the following sections, she outlines her methods for each responsibility.

Ika programs music based on several factors: trends she observes from Jakarta, audience requests, how songs fit together (based on mood, beat, or theme), and singers and bands who pay to have their music played. Her own musical taste makes up part of the equation. She says,

Ika: Our station is open request, so every broadcaster has their own style. For me, I play seventy percent from my own programming, thirty percent from listener requests. This happens because of course the composition and color of each segment has to be different. For me, seventy percent me, thirty percent their color. So, for me, if I'm no longer on air, listeners can surely tell, this is Mbak Ika who's currently broadcasting or not. That's one pleasure from the world of radio. It's capable of making me happy because every day I meet different people, and every day I gather together songs, the next day has to be different. Not just from day to day, one hour to the next has to be different. That's our expertise in playing songs. Andrea: And what is your process? How do you choose songs that fit with the day, or the time of day?

Ika: Because I'm the music director here, I prepare songs for the other DJs. Dangdut is divided up into three groups: there's dangdut nostalgia, there's disco dangdut, and there's regular dangdut hits. For dangdut nostalgia, I play classic dangdut songs from the 60s: Ida Laila, Orkes Melayu from the 60s. I wasn't born yet, but I still have to know the material! I have to know Ida Laila, A. Rafiq, A. Kadir, Rhoma Irama, and artists from that era. Next, for dangdut hits, I play that here at Radio Wijaya starting at two o'clock in the afternoon. That's from 1990 until the 2000s. Now, for disco, even if the song is only differentiated by a fast beat, we'll play it in the disco segment. So, how do I mix, one two three? That's based on what sounds good to listeners, keeping in mind their social class, that becomes my responsibility. I've already been here for fifteen years [laughs], so

that already takes care of itself. Sometimes I go along with the rhythm of the music, sometimes, oh, this music is harmonious with this other music. So we have to let it run its natural course. What's this song, where did it come from. I still get left behind, even though I'm always watching Indosiar and other TV shows that play dangdut, I still get left behind. That's why we need listeners. Sometimes I'll give them a theme and ask, hey, what's this song? What songs are popular right now? Even though I usually already know, they know better than I do, because they are true dangdut lovers! They like it! So it works out. Maybe in years past broadcasters had to be smarter. I don't need to be any smarter than listeners [laughs].

At the time of the interview, there were three dangdut radio stations in the Surabaya area: Suara Giri, which broadcasts out of Gresik, a city to the west of Surabaya, and Kota FM in Surabaya. In addition to differentiating formats within Radio Wijaya, Ika also differentiated Radio Wijaya from those other stations. While those other stations tended to broadcast local, low quality, and overly vulgar music, Radio Wijaya broadcast the true dangdut. The sections below about moral responsibility and views of dangdut audiences will further explore these ideas. Ika outlined how her orientation to the music impacted her day-to-day labor:

Ika: My main personal goal for them is to bring them to a realization about what dangdut really is, dangdut like it used to be. Because the dangdut that I play, that's I've been playing since 2001, it's not like what they play at Kota FM.

Susi: [In English] Oh yeah, what's the difference?

Ika: [In Indonesian] The difference is that at Kota FM they play vulgar [I. *seronok*] dangdut songs.

Susi: Vulgar and narcissistic.

Ika: Yes.

Susi: [In English, to me] You know Kota FM, right?

Ika: It's true, we play songs straight from the laptop. Not from local Orkes Melayu with their standard of production. They produce everything themselves. I was taught by my boss, right, Susi, that that's not permissible. In the end, that marks Radio Wijaya as different from the other two.

Susi: Kota FM and what else?

Ika: Suara Giri. Their model is even more dangerous.

Susi: More erotic.

Ika: More vulgar.

Andrea: When you say “vulgar,” what do you mean by that?

Ika: Maybe there are lyrics that invite people to, uh...premarital relationships [I. *cinta satu malam*]. Or maybe breaking the law.

Susi: [In English] Okay, taking a drop liquor. Staying out all night.

Andrea: [In Indonesian] And usually local Orkes Melayu give you songs like that directly?

Ika: From time to time those other stations get songs from them, and that’s the difference; Radio Wijaya has never done that. I myself have gotten offers like that, but I never will. Additionally, the audio quality is different.

Susi: [In English] We want to position ourselves as more classic.

Andrea: [In Indonesian] And as more professional?

Ika: Yes, the audio quality is an important factor, because it’s clearly different. That’s why the dangdut at Radio Wijaya is acceptable to young people, because they appreciate a higher quality of audio. Those other stations play audio quality that isn’t serious, and they mouth off, saying that’s good enough for the lower socio-economic class.

Susi: You mean the term?

Ika: No, I mean the songs that come from the local level. Their quality is usually worse. For me as music director, if I’m trying to edit a song, the quality makes my tinkering so much harder.

Susi: When you edit, what do you edit?

Ika: I edit the audio again, so that it’s—

Susi: You edit them again?

Ika: Yeah. Even the songs straight from Jakarta, I have to edit them to fit with my inputs. The audio technology at every radio is different.

Andrea: What’s the payment process for the songs you broadcast? Do you have to pay royalties?

Susi: No, because we work together [I. *Kerjasama*]. We work together in a way that’s profitable to both. Those who bring songs here know that Radio Wijaya will help their songs get heard. We’ll introduce our listeners to them, so there is dualism. We both profit.

Andrea: I’ve heard of cases in which there was a new song from a new, maybe unknown singer, and she wanted to promote her song and had to pay the radio station. Has that ever happened here?

Ika: Yes, that’s happened.

Susi: [In English] Does for the small actress, small.

Ika: [In Indonesian] Yeah, actually, for those who aren’t popular. If they’re not famous and they request an interview here, we charge a fee, because that counts as advertising. So, we ask for a fee. But for famous singers, they don’t need us to bring them to the spotlight, so it’s mutually beneficial. If they come here, that will make us more popular, and their songs will be heard.

One challenge Ika faced as a DJ and later as music director was that, as a non-fan, she at first struggled to keep up with dangdut that was popular at the moment. As she acknowledged above, one strategy she used was depending on listener requests and participation. In addition, to keep tabs on trends in Jakarta, she also watches dangdut singing competition television. When I asked whether she watched Indosiar, she responded:

Ika: Yes, I have to, because it influences what gets played. If I didn't watch, I'd get left behind and won't know what's popular in Jakarta, because Jakarta is still our yardstick [I. parameter], even though the people of East Java have their own significant potential. Because dangdut is originally from East Java, then it entered Central Java, then West Java, and only then reached Jakarta.

Susi: Yes, yes, Surabaya.

Ika: Yes. East Java is vast. Dangdut singers were the horses that carried the music. That's the reality. Only now the center is Jakarta, because Jakarta is the capital of Indonesia, so they have everything there. So if you want to be famous, it's not possible in Surabaya. It's got to be Jakarta.

This attitude was often echoed by dangdut industry professionals in Surabaya: on one hand, the belief that East Java was the home to the real dangdut; on the other, acknowledging that Jakarta was the center of the broadcasting industry. As mentioned in earlier chapters about singer experience, singers also believed this, and saw Jakarta as a place to go to boost their popularity before returning to the more comfortable and profitable road of touring through East and Central Java.

Ika also fields requests from listeners as part of her daily work, and she partly relies on them to stay up to date. Increasingly, she uses social media to field song requests. In the middle of our conversation, Susi pointed at one of the computer monitors, where messages flowed in in a steady stream through the application WhatsApp, referred to in Indonesian as WA.

Susi: Is that for requests?

Ika: Yes, you mean this WA? What does it say this morning?

Susi: Yeah, you mean WA requests show up here? [Turning to me, switching to English] What's App for any audience that they want to send, to request our music to play for them.

Andrea: [In Indonesian] Do they send requests any other ways besides WhatsApp?

Ika: Yeah, this communication is just with our listeners.

Susi: [In English] This is your live communication with the audience, but another online that's not live is Facebook, and website also. Wijaya FM website, Facebook. [In Indonesian] Do you use any others? Twitter?

Ika: IG. Instagram.

Susi: That's got to be young people, right? If it's social media, it's got to be them, am I right?

At Radio Wijaya (as well as other stations, including Suara Surabaya), social media engagement is integrated into the studio process. As Ika stated above, she divides her programming into seventy percent her choice and design and thirty percent listener requests. Listener requests do not only come in through phone calls. Many of those listener requests come from social media: WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and the Radio Wijaya website, all of which Ika monitored by herself in the studio while broadcasting. Social media is a way to stay engaged with listeners, and listeners expect the DJ on duty to check for their social media comments and requests. Radio Wijaya's social media accounts are not only a tool for marketing; they are methods of direct communication between DJs and listeners.

Despite her leading role at the radio station, Ika did describe one policy that discriminated by gender. During her tenure, Radio Wijaya received an award for female representation in radio from MURI, The Indonesian World Records Museum, located in Semarang. All their DJs at the time were women except one. The DJ from 10pm through the night is a man, and, according to Ika and Susi, the radio station would have to get

special permission to hire a woman for that timeslot. It was not clear at the time from whom that permission would have to come—whether it was a law, company policy, or local rule. Such prohibitions against women working night shift relate to other discriminatory policies and family practices discussed in Chapter 4. However, many women like Ika see such policies as supportive rather than punitive. “The evening shift is more popular anyway, and I get to be comfortable.”

Ika balances the requirements of her boss, listener requests, Jakarta trends, and her own taste preferences in her programming. She is also influenced by other industry professionals, most notably at a yearly conference for broadcasters in Jakarta called NRD, National Radio Day, at which radio professionals meet to discuss trends, network between labels and radio distributors, and consider their moral responsibility [I. *tanggung jawab moral*]. I will examine this last component in more detail throughout this section of the chapter, as it figured in every interview with producers and radio personnel.

#### *Attitudes Towards Dangdut and Dangdut Audiences*

As far as I could deduce, Radio Wijaya’s focus on young people was unique for a dangdut radio station in Surabaya. According to Ika, youth are more open to dangdut than they were even five to six years previously.

Ika: Young people right now are already more open to dangdut compared to five or six years ago.

Susi: [in English] Especially because Ayu Ting-Ting.

Ika: [In Indonesian] Five or six years ago, dangdut was still underestimated [I. *dipandang sebelah mata*]. But now, increasingly singers don’t act like singers from earlier years, you know, bling-bling, with messages in the lyrics from the margins [I. *pinggiran*]. These days, singers keep with the times, pay attention to choreographers from Korea. As a result, kids these days like it better.

Intrigued by Ika's word choice and description of dangdut audiences, I pressed her to differentiate the kind of programming she selects for young people. The resulting conversation reveals how many university-educated dangdut professionals view dangdut audiences and their responsibility towards them.

Andrea: Why do you differentiate between dangdut for young adults and dangdut for everyone else at Radio Wijaya?

Ika: By targeting young people, I want to find fans that have a different character. For dangdut, the typical listener is B and below. For young people, however, they have a greater spread, B and C but up to A.

Susi: According to radio, they consider audience, they separate them into groups to better find advertisers.

Confused by their terminology, I later returned to the topic to clarify. The terms they used, categorizing listeners by A, B, C, seemed to divide people by socio-economic class.

Andrea: This is returning to dangdut listeners. In your opinion, who are they, and how are they categorized usually?

Ika: What's clear is that they are *not* young professionals. They are housewives, blue-collar workers [I. *wirusahawan*], some middle school and high school kids. But the main test group is the one I mentioned before, fans from group BC.

Susi: So the highest are from A.

Ika: We play to B, because those are who dangdut's fans are.

Andrea: Are there any stereotypes that, for example, housewives prefer dangdut nostalgia, or stereotypes like that?

Ika: Not really. Actually, it's true that housewives and men who are over 30 years old like dangdut like this [gestures to the computer], dangdut nostalgia. But for young people, they prefer disco dangdut because of the faster tempo. For dangdut like this [again referring to the nostalgic dangdut currently playing], rarely will people from twenty-five–thirty listen.

I had often heard the phrase *menengah ke bawa*, or the middle to the bottom, to refer to dangdut fans. As discussed above, by necessity, television and radio producers carve up segments of the population in order to better obtain advertisers. Factors like gender, age, and socio-economic class are the most common divisors, but what those divisors mean to advertisers—what is targeted at women, and why, for example—varies greatly by region

and era and reveal underlying cultural assumptions. Ika identifies two main ways of dividing her audience. The first, the ABC system, seems to be purely socio-economic in nature. Young professionals and the educated upper classes are A. Dangdut's audience, the *menengah ke bawa*, are B and C. The other, somewhat less formalized way Ika divides her audience is by generation. By appealing to young people [I. *anak muda* or *ABG, anak baru gede*], whose eventual placement on the ABC scale is not yet set, she hopes to expand dangdut's audience.

*A Moral Responsibility to the Audience:*

Ika spontaneously brought up the idea of moral responsibility several times and acknowledged towards the end of the interview that it was one of the main focuses of the national radio broadcasters conference she attended each April in Jakarta. Tied to the paternalistic view of dangdut audiences, the core of broadcaster's moral responsibility is to prevent music that encourages immoral behavior from being broadcast on air.

Andrea: I'm curious, have you ever been censored?

Ika: It happens, usually with songs that are vulgar.

Susi: How do they interpret Kota FM? How do they get away with it?

Ika: They've been censored too.

Susi: But they can still go on like...

Ika: Because, sorry, yeah [laughs], because whenever the investigative team arrives, they play normal songs. They can't watch the station twenty-four hours a day.

Susi: [In English] So they can't control all the time.

Ika: [In Indonesian] They can't just play whatever they want all the time, it's forbidden.

Susi: So it's just like hide and seek.

Ika: Yeah, so they pass.

Andrea: Why do they bother trying?

Ika: Because the listeners they're trying to attract are different. Their class is different.



Susi: Class *warkop*. Class *warung kopi*.<sup>50</sup>

Ika: Class on the margins [I. *pinggiran*]. Definitely different. Their class is definitely different.

I was here struck by their frankness in discussing their target socio-economic class, as well as how they differentiated their dangdut listeners from those of Kota FM. In their view, Kota FM targeted a lower socio-economic class. The explicit eroticism of the songs was one sign by which they knew which class was the target audience. They imagined that the socio-economic class most attracted to vulgar music—which they earlier connected to low audio quality and local groups—was also the poorest. There's also an implied disdain for the men who listen at *warung kopi*, small shops or stands that sell coffee in packets on the side of the road. By referring to them as *kelas warkop*, Susi hints that their own indolence is partly responsible for their social position.

In discussions about moral responsibility, Ika and Susi expressed their belief that mass media carried powerful influence over this perceived weakness in the lowest socio-economic classes.

Ika: [speaking about radio professionals] However, if we ourselves limit what gets played, I'm certain that other people won't be able to reproach dangdut music. Our old boss himself used to say that dangdut would be *seronok* only because of us. Radio personnel have a moral responsibility too. If we don't play music like that, *insyallah* the world won't be like that either.

It's not quite clear whether, in Ika's view, the sin of vulgarity stems from the lower classes themselves (radio stations play vulgar music because their target audience demands it) or whether the innocent but ignorant lower classes are led astray by mass

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<sup>50</sup> Susi refers to men who spend large amounts of time sitting and chatting in food stalls by the side of the road.

media. This conversation also reveals the tension between the paternalistic view of dangdut's audience, the *rakyat*, as pure but easily misguided, and the logic of markets and advertising by which radio professionals are now encouraged to abide. Seeking clarification, I asked about moral responsibility again later in our conversation.

Andrea: I'd like to ask again about the moral responsibility you mentioned that you feel as a music producer and director.

Ika: For me...yeah, why. For me, I want to make sure that the music I play on Radio Wijaya doesn't influence anyone, doesn't carry them away or invite them to drink or anything like that. There has to be a term, a limit, to avoid bringing young people to negative things. They're just kids.

Andrea: So you want to entertain, of course, but you also have a moral goal.

Ika: Yeah, never to carry young people to things that they...they're just kids, right? And anything can happen. Especially through music. Music has a strong influence in young people. It's said that music is universal, right? Music can teach them, but it also can bring them to suicide. So, for me, I have a moral responsibility to educate through the music I broadcast.

By focusing on young people, Ika pivots the conversation away from socio-economic class and the associated affiliations between eroticism and working-class vulgarity. By mentioning suicide, she also seems to pivot away from moral danger to emotional one, though she might have intended to argue that sin, depression, and suicide are connected. As a music director interested in targeting young people in particular, this pivot makes sense. However, as we have seen from earlier conversations and will see repeatedly in this chapter, narratives about dangdut audiences as either pure but easily corrupted or inherently corrupt permeate how university-educated dangdut professionals talk about their work.

At the end of our conversation, Ika acknowledged that, in fact, when she started her career, she'd aggressively opposed dangdut. These comments reveal the extent to

which Ika had internalized narratives about dangdut's vulgarity. However, they also show how a career in dangdut can change middle-class perceptions.

Ika: At the start, I didn't like it, so someone who disliked dangdut [in English] must love it. Maybe say like that. [In Indonesian] At the start, I didn't like it. Dangdut, Anti. Anti.

Andrea: Anti? You were even anti?

Ika: Even anti, yes, from my anti position then, I didn't understand anything. I just relied on listener requests. One listener requested a Rhoma Irama song. [In English] If you can believe it, my first time. [In Indonesian] What was the request? What was the title? "A Dog and Trash" [I. *Anjing Dan Sampah*]. "A Dog and Trash." And I was startled. Sir, is that a real song? Is there a real title like that? And there was, and I was embarrassed that as an announcer I didn't know the song. From that moment, I was pumped up, because, you know, I have to know! I have to learn! That's why I decided never to close myself off from things like that. Never closed off. Instead, hone my skills. I said I hated it, it's true. My hate towards dangdut was only if the dangdut was...you know. I knew that environment, singers on air wearing clothing like...[sighs]. I never understood how they could do that, and the more it's like that, it makes me want to scream. How can you do that? Because I'm already like this [she gestures to her hijab], closing off my *aurat* [the Indonesian term for intimate parts within Islam, interpreted by many women in Indonesia to mean the whole body except for the face and hands], I don't understand why they have to open everything up. If you're talented, it comes from your voice! Or maybe some other way, just not *seronok*. But, I guess, that is the demand of the market [I. *permintaan pasar*]. Why not a different market and different class?

Ika recognizes that her experience in dangdut koplo opened her eyes to other ways of being. At the same time, like many others, she struggled to accept the eroticism some singers expressed with their dance and clothing choices. For Ika, that criticism took on a religious tone as well as a socio-economic class-based one. In her view, she had already closed off her body appropriately, and she struggled to understand a different way of viewing and presenting the body.

This call for a different class of singer was often repeated by industry professionals, men and women alike. The class of singer is often seen as a barrier against

dangdut's ability to become popular on the national stage. Like many industry professionals in East Java, Ika was skeptical of dangdut's ability to go international. She seemed to think it unlikely that a foreign audience could find the music of *kelas warkop* appealing. In the Conclusion, I will discuss further how elite industry professionals and government officials attempt to change dangdut—and singers in particular—to better appeal to their idea of what appeals to an international audience.

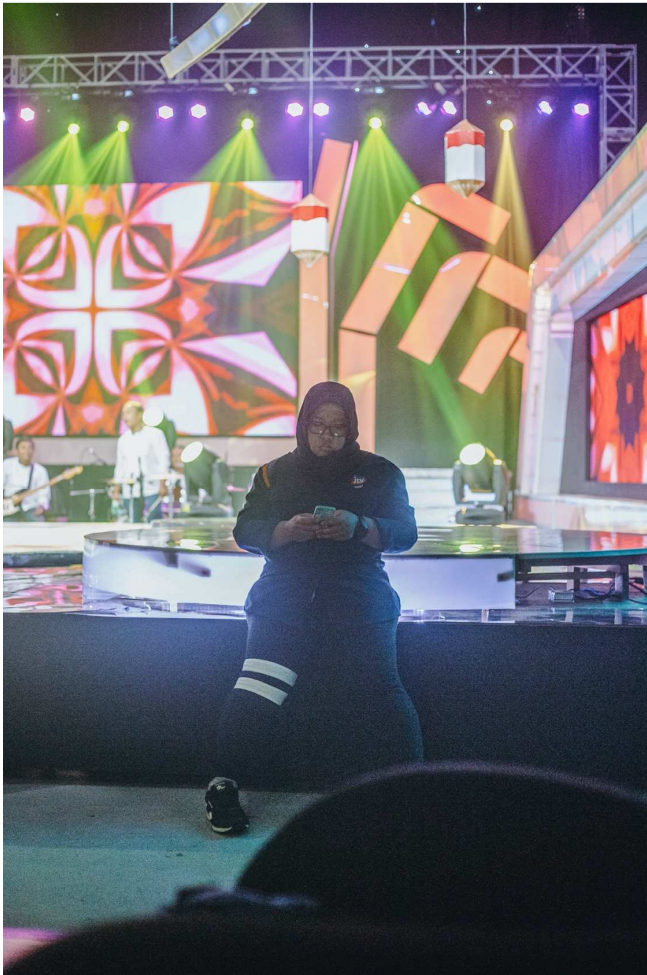
Producers: Gita at *Stasiun Dangdut*

Like radio programmers, television producers come to dangdut koplo industries as professional producers first. Their involvement in dangdut comes second. They thus also tend to see themselves as separate from their audience.

*Stasiun Dangdut* is the premiere dangdut television show broadcast locally from Surabaya in East Java. It airs live every day on the channel JTV, the first regional private television station in Indonesia and the first to broadcast whole shows in a regional language (Javanese). Owned and operated by the Jawa Pos Group, which owns more than 151 newspapers across Indonesia and ten other regional television stations across East Java and Madura, JTV was founded during Reformasi in 2001. Rather than feature singing competitions, *Stasiun Dangdut* usually involves live performances from guest artists (two or three per show) interspersed with commentary and “gimmicks” from MCs. Lenny and Dian, discussed above, worked at *Stasiun Dangdut* in 2018. The show's head producer, Gita, was a woman.

From the first moment I met her, Gita drew me to her with her focused competence and casual laugh. She was young for a television producer. She dressed in

jeans, polo shirts, and tennis shoes, and seemed unconcerned with vanity, a rarity in media industries (Figure 75). Her manner of speech was straightforward and unfussy, yet she was supportive towards the others.



*Figure 75: Gita checks social media during a commercial break at Stasiun Dangdut. Photo by the author.*

Gita had been working at JTV for six years when I met her. Born in Gresik to a comfortably middle-class family, she studied natural sciences in high school before getting a bachelor's degree in broadcasting. Like Ika, she'd never intended to focus on dangdut. She told me,

Gita: Honestly, I'm not at *Stasiun Dangdut* because of my own interests, but rather because of the appointment system [I. *sistemnya penunjukan*] at JTV. So whether I wanted it or not, I have to enjoy and develop interest in the music. I have to research and update myself about dangdut every day, because the trends are always changing, especially because East Java is the trendsetter in dangdut.

Gita did not choose to work in dangdut; JTV's management chose for her. This was true for many of the *Stasiun Dangdut* team, from camera operators and interns to producers. They were hired by JTV and assigned to one of several possible shows. Dangdut fandom and musical experience did not appear to be factors. It's very likely Gita hopes to move on from a dangdut-centered position quickly to further her career. She aims to please her audience, but sees herself as separate from them.

#### *Managing Talent and Creating Programming*

I conducted research at *Stasiun Dangdut* over the course of several months, often going to observe the show several times a week. As a result, I got to see Gita's work in action. On the soundstage she was the boss, organizing timing and cueing commercial breaks. She also kept track of ratings and was responsible for developing new gimmicks to keep the audience interested. Sometimes this was planned ahead, as for special events like Hari Kartini, discussed in Chapter 3, but just as often she would pull the MCs aside during a commercial break to tell them about her new plan.

Gita and the MCs would often pull me into the gimmicks. When I arrived at the soundstage, Gita would take a frank look at what I was wearing and how my hair was styled. Most days she would let me sit on the sidelines, taking photos and chatting with MCs and singers. However, from time to time, she would say something like, "Andrea is wearing good batik today, which matches this singer or this event. Let's have her join in

on ‘Goyang Dua Jari,’ and then she’ll do a skit with Candra.” She would give Candra a few ideas and teach me a phrase or two to say in Javanese, all the while reassuring me that it would be funny, even if I did not know what I was saying on live television (Figure 76).



*Figure 76: The author with singers, MCs, and a few other members of the Stasiun Dangdut team, including Gita (second from left, back row).*

In addition to timing and structure, Gita had a voice in hiring singers and musicians. She focused on finding and promoting new, talented singers and bands, both

so that their talent could be shared and so *Stasiun Dangdut* would remain fresh. In her view, when an artist or band performed on *Stasiun Dangdut*, it meant they were acknowledged as significant regional talents, with the hope that *Stasiun Dangdut* would push them to further fame. She gave Via Vallen as an example. Her vision attempted to push *Stasiun Dangdut* further into the category of a show in which only the top regional performers would be featured. Unlike competition from Jakarta, Gita envisioned *Stasiun Dangdut* as “a room for singers and musicians,” “still a place to which they want to return.”

When I sat down with Gita to do a formal interview, I’d already interviewed several producers and dangdut professionals. In addition, I’d been spending time with Gita for months, watching her in action. I had a suspicion about how she might respond to my question. Her answer reveals how her own attitudes toward dangdut influences how she runs the show, from hiring to the rules on the soundstage.

Andrea: Do you like dangdut?

Gita: At the start, no [laughs]. Not at the beginning. Dangdut is associated with...This is just my personal opinion, honestly, there are good musicians, sometimes the singers have a spirit of *jual free, jual bebas* [the phrase implies singers selling themselves too eagerly]. Sometimes they don’t know who they’re talking to, they can’t read the situation. Especially those who are new. Pop singers, MCs, they know better, and they can be controlled. But dangdut singers, with them I have to be patient. [whispers] Patient.

Andrea: Do you think that’s because of education level, or—

Gita: That’s exactly it. Those who are educated. Yeah, that influences it. That’s why at *Stasiun Dangdut* I don’t like to switch bands. I mean, I want to stick with bands that have already been here a long time, so we can be confident in them, because when there are new ones, there will definitely need to be some educating. Especially those who underestimate, like, we can do it, we can do it. The atmosphere off-air compared to on-air is always different. Am I right? Once the spotlight hits, the camera is on you, the duration is different. That’s why for bands that have never been on TV before and don’t have that many hours performing, I always ask them to come ahead of time, get the feel of the studio. They’d be



shocked otherwise. Off-air is different, they can stop suddenly if something doesn't sound good. If they tried that here...

Andrea: So they have to be ready, have to know how to play to the camera.

Gita: They have to be mentally read too. When the spotlight gets in their eyes for the first time [mimics freezing]? It's like that all the time. Even me, if they bring me in front of the camera and I have to talk to the presenters, the presenters have to think of ways to hide my stage fright.

Andrea: It's got to be difficult.

Gita: There are some that are from the middle of nowhere, never been shot before. Their thinking is all mixed up.

Gita was certainly venting her frustrations here. As she had already told me,

attracting new talent was part of her mission. However, she struggled to negotiate between the need to keep up with off-air trends and the regulations of producing a dangdut television show. Television must be ordered and organized, with bands and singers who know when to stay silent and how to treat the other workers. Gita handled this difficulty with a variety of techniques. Spatial distance and security guards were the dominant methods. For example, MCs were given priority seats in front of the soundstage, behind the cameras but in front of the live video feed. They would get on the stage from the front and sides. Singers, in contrast, were led to backstage seats separate from the MCs, band, and all but a few intern crew members. They would get onstage via the far back corner. Once they were seated in that backstage nook, they were stuck there for the duration of the show, only able to communicate with each other and with an intern on a headset placed there to give instructions. While this position may protect singers from unwanted interaction with crew, it also effectively put singers in a box, their behavior regulated, and any possibilities of unruliness or stepping out of line largely prevented spatially (Figures 77 and 78).



*Figure 77: Singers backstage at Stasiun Dangdut. From this corner, they can only walk onstage, as Lenny (far left) is doing. An intern sits with her back to the camera. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 78: The view of the stage from the singers' corner. Photo by the author.*

*Holding Dangdut Audiences at a Distance*

Gita knew from previous conversations that I was interested in women in dangdut television. Perhaps holding that in her mind, when asked about dangdut audiences, she ruminated on the connections, the erotic triangles, to reference Henry Spiller, between women in the audience and women onstage.

Gita: Talking about women and women in dangdut, wow. That's the center of it. Where is there a dangdut singer who is a man who...Even us, as women, we would rather watch women singers than men. It's like, watching men sing, it's like a bunny [I. *kelinci*].

Andrea: What's that?

Gita: I mean, are there ever man dangdut singers who are macho? Like that. Difficult to name one, right? We women like men who are macho. But men who sing...in the end, we enjoy watching women. In the end, both men and women prefer to watch women. It's the same in dangdut. The viewers of *Stasiun Dangdut* are balanced, men and women. It's not view by men a certain percent and women a certain percent, it's perfectly balanced between men and women watching. That's why right now we keep encouraging the presenters to address the viewers as "ibu-ibu, ibu-ibu," because we want to increase the number of women watching. Why? Because women are the consumers in the household. The advertisements are like that too, right?

Andrea: That's interesting, because the stereotype about dangdut—and maybe this comes from cafes, night entertainment—is that it's mainly men watching. That's not correct?

Gita: It turns out that it's even. Many, many women also like to watch. In fact, we want to attract even more women viewers. If you want a new program, they want the viewer base to be women.

Andrea: And why is that?

Gita: What I said before, women are the consumers. If there's an advertisement, it's the women who actually buy the products.

Andrea: Maybe, except for cigarettes. Oh, but at this time of day, you can't show cigarette ads, can you?

Gita: Yeah, it's not allowed. Cigarettes are only 10pm and later. But there are lots of women who smoke, and men can't buy anything, since their money is drawn from women. As a result, we prioritize women.

Gita's comments echo pervasive industry beliefs. First, the idea that women control household finances is common in Java and discussed in the Introduction, Chapter 1, and

Chapter 4. It's considered common practice for men to hand over most of their paychecks to their wives for management; likewise, women are considered more likely to watch television during the day.

Gita also mentions that women prefer watching other women perform to watching men sing. Like many dangdut fans, Gita credits this to men singers usually not being "macho" enough. This is a commonly expressed issue in dangdut television, and I have written elsewhere about how dangdut competition shows in Jakarta look prioritize finding men contestants who are masculine-presenting enough [I. *cowok banget*] (Decker 2020). In contrast to Jakarta producers, Gita argues there may not be a need to seek more men. Women, in her estimation, are perfectly happy watching other women.

Like Ika and Yuli, Gita has her own ideas about her moral responsibility as a television producer.

Andrea: In your opinion, do you have a responsibility to viewers?

Gita: Yeah. That's why there are some songs that we don't allow to be sung. There are so many dangdut songs that are crude, dirty, that use words that make people use their imaginations—there are so many. I start from there, usually songs that are banned and inappropriate clothing. Off-air, the worse it is, the more people like it. I've already had to stop several.

Andrea: What's an example of a song that's banned?

Gita: "Konco Turu,"<sup>51</sup> "Kimcil Kepolen." I didn't like them from the title. It turned out the lyrics themselves are fine, it's just the title. *Kimcil* is a word, it's like *cabe-cabe*,<sup>52</sup> do you know what that means? In Javanese, it's *kimcil*. That's why I really don't want it. Songs about people dying are also a problem [...] The

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<sup>51</sup> "Konco turu," literally "friend for sleeping" in Javanese, is the equivalent of friends with benefits. The song "Konco Turu," written by Santos B., was a hit in 2018 when the interview was given, recorded by the top koplo singers of the moment, including both Via Vallen and Nella Kharisma.

<sup>52</sup> *Cabe-cabe* is a slang term for women considered easy or slutty. While a *cabe* is a small, spicy bird's eye chili, and many dangdut songs use food-related metaphors to discuss sexuality, *cabe* is also an acronym for *Cewek* (woman) *Alay* (a *singkatan* of *anak lebay*, or cheesy or tacky young person) *Bisa Entot* (fuckable).

song “Ayah” I don’t like much because it’s about a father killing himself, but they go “ha eh ha eh.” The father’s dying, why are you going “ha eh ha eh?”

Similar to Ika, Gita’s moral responsibility is related to protecting audiences from lyrics that encourage sexuality outside of marriage, drinking, or gambling. Also like Ika, there is some tension in Gita’s view of the audience. Are they already corrupted, seeking out erotic or violent lyrics? Or are they corrupted by television? Regardless of the nuance of her views, Gita sees the audience as separate from herself, an entity to be listened to when they comment or make requests, but to be held at a distance.

#### Gender and Technical Roles

The roles I have outlined are by no means exhaustive. The world of dangdut koplo involves many sprawling and inter-related industries spanning from the glitz of Jakarta to *organ tunggal* and karaoke singers at small village celebrations. I must note some surprising gender divisions not shown from these examples because of research limitations. Women in all these roles deserve further exploration. The first concerns sound engineers and other technical roles. In my home country of the US as well as Canada, the UK, and Australia, women in technical roles are outnumbered by men and face discrimination against their abilities. Leonard writes that in Australia in 2011, “more than 90% of sound technicians, camera operators, and directors of photography were male,” arguing that this reflects a widespread cultural understanding that men are more suited to complex technology (Leonard 2016:40). In Indonesia little such discrimination exists, and women are equally active in a technical capacity behind the scenes at television studios and radios (Figure 79).

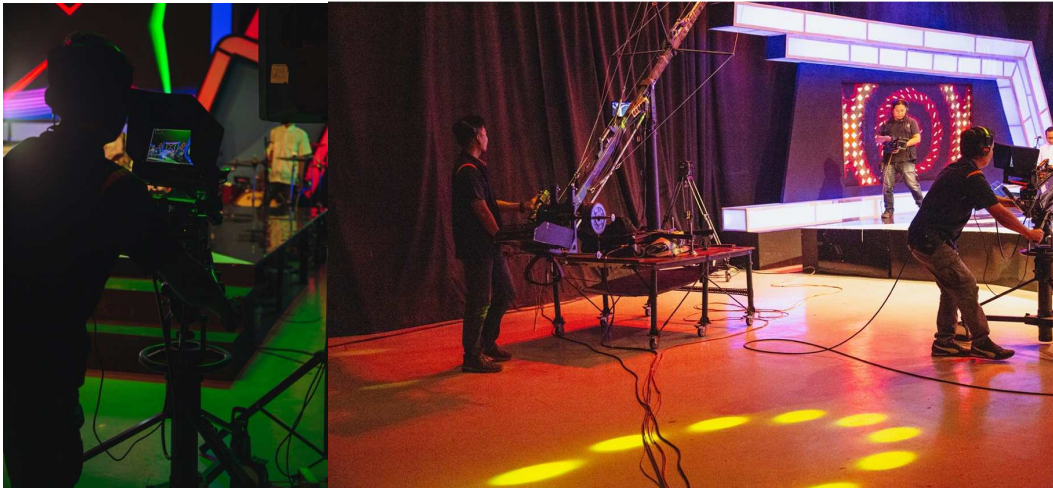


*Figure 79: The sound and editing team at Stasiun Dangdut. Photo by the author.*

I noticed one significant gender barrier, however: both at off-air concerts and in television studios, I never once saw a woman behind the camera as a professional. When it came to audio-visual companies that record concerts, the lack of women was likely due to the late nights and boisterous crowds, the same situation that keeps most women from going to concerts as fans. In the television studio, however, the justification was different. Gita told me that they had had women camera operators in the past, but that many lacked the upper body strength to hold the camera steady. There were four cameras at *Stasiun Dangdut* in 2018, as shown in Figure 80. One center master moved very little and took wide establishing shots. The camera operator could tilt and digitally zoom, but the camera itself did not move in space. A second camera on the right stood on a tripod with



wheels. It tilted very little, but the operator wheels the camera back and forth and from side to side. A third camera was handheld, physically carried by the operator, who would sometimes get on the stage and in the singer's space. The largest rig was on the left on a raised platform. The operator controlled one end of a twenty- or thirty-foot-long arm. This was certainly the heaviest and most unwieldy rig, but I doubted that physical strength was the determining factor in who operated any of the cameras.



*Figure 80: Camera setup at Stasiun Dangdut. Photos by the author.*

### **Conclusion: Aspiration, Media, Morals, and Gender**

Women's careers in dangdut koplo are all marked by aspirations, but socio-economic class divides their visions for the music, their careers, and their audiences. Most managers and musicians see audiences as like themselves; their days are consumed with practicing their craft, traveling, and making deals. Their visions for the future of the music reflect that; they do not pretend to control the direction of dangdut koplo, and instead express the simple hope that the music will continue to expand and grow. In contrast, television and radio producers often do not see themselves as part of dangdut's

audience despite their consistent, active participation. They separate themselves from audiences in their discourse and declare a responsibility to guide and protect audiences. Their oft-expressed hope for a new class of dangdut music and singers shows their desire to shape the future of the music industry and argue for the future they desire for Indonesia as a whole. The music, they argue, may innovate and follow trends, but it must be purified of erotic clothing, dance, and lyrics, as well as any lyrics that encourage alcohol or gambling. The singers must be educated, polite, modest, and sexually pure by their standards. These elements of dangdut, some of the very elements considered stereotypically standard in *kampung* practice, must be purified to make dangdut worthy. Their aspiration is thus not only directed at their own successful careers, but also at the music as a whole and, by extension, toward the *rakyat*, dangdut's audience.

Such questions of audience are also tied to media. Managers and musicians increasingly create their own content and publish it through social media, where they have significant control over their framing of themselves, if not over their reception. In contrast, women working in radio and television face a more complicated relationship between different types of media as they engage with their audiences. Seeing social media as a natural tool for communication, they obsessively check their feeds and even change the programming in real time to respond to viewer comments or listener requests. Despite this extraordinary degree of engagement, they nonetheless view the opinions of their audiences with suspicion. This stems in part from New Order discourse that framed the *rakyat* as ignorant and potentially dangerous, as well as that discourse's influence on university education for journalists and broadcasters. As mentioned in the previous



chapter, women viewers of dangdut competition television use social media to push back against jury decisions or rules they deem to be unjust or content to which they object, making social media both a direct line of communication and a way for the audience to trouble the discourse surrounding the success or failure of mass media systems. As audiences and advertisers push against New Order ways of organizing media systems, it remains to be seen how dangdut television and radio broadcasting will change in the future.

What role does gender play in these women's careers? With the exception of musicians, women often hold all of the roles discussed in this chapter, and their appearance in them is therefore not by default strange or stigmatized. However, gendered expectations still color their work. For musicians, of course, their own marketing materials and social media engagement explicate this difference. Their distinctiveness becomes a selling point. From a heightened emphasis on clothing, appearance, and dance to her stated goal of helping girls realize they can be musicians, gender is a primary issue for Epep and other members of OM New Kendedes. Lenny had similarly internalized the idea that appearance and support were defining components of her role as an MC. Though women frequently hold most mid-level industry jobs, gendered expectations crept into the picture in ideas about, for example, whether women could work the night shift at the radio, whether they were strong or technically gifted enough to hold a camera, and how a woman instrumentalist should dress.

Gender distinctions also influenced how women saw their own work. For producers, however, I noticed that women were more likely than men producers to

uphold a moral responsibility to their audience and concern for the well-being of young people exposed to dangdut music. For Gita and Ika, this maternal element to their work may help them to justify to themselves their involvement in music that they find distasteful. By using the power of their position to guide and protect listeners they imagine to be impressionable and malleable, they aspire to shape the future of dangdut and of Indonesia.

## **Conclusion: The Contest for Dangdut**

Ika: Dangdut going global [I. *mendunia*], what's the goal? [...] In my opinion, dangdut still can't be carried outside of Indonesia. Why? Because of the nation [I. *bangsa*]. It always comes back to the nation.

In October 2018 I gave a presentation in Jakarta about women's lives and experiences in dangdut koplo. Unbeknownst to me, two officials from BEKRAF (the Indonesian Creative Economy Agency [I. *Badan Ekonomi Kreatif*]) were in the audience. After the talk had ended and all Q&A addressed, they approached me, two handsome middle-aged men in collared shirts and slacks. They introduced themselves and mentioned some of their projects to promote dangdut on the global stage. I'd heard of these programs—Hello Dangdut was meant to promote dangdut internationally, while Wonderful Indonesia (and its domestic tourism affiliate Pesona Indonesia) was meant to promote Indonesian tourism more broadly by supporting a wide variety of cultural events and destinations. Perhaps they sensed my discomfort, because one of them asked,

“What should we do to better promote dangdut koplo?”

I paused. I had expected more paternalistic narratives of the kind I'd heard from Jakarta producers and government officials about the rakyat, the middle to lower classes, and singers with a different image. I had not expected a question.

“You may not like what I think,” I told them. “I think the local practice is already clearly appealing and successful, and that you have to respect the local talent. They're the ones who know the music.”

The two officials smiled nervously, gave me their cards, and told me they would appreciate my input. I should have told them that my input was not nearly as important as

that of the industry professionals. But instead, I took their cards, thanked them politely, and excused myself.

This interaction was especially striking for me because of conversations I had had with television producers and radio music directors. In particular Ika, music director at Radio Wijaya Surabaya, had much to say about dangdut going global and BEKRAF's role in that process a few months earlier. Ika's words begin this Conclusion, and I will return to them at the end.

Inspired by calls to eschew binaries of empowerment and exploitation and to explore women as mid-level actors in music industries, in these chapters I have explored the social constraints upon women in dangdut koplo and how women respond to those constraints to pursue their own careers and fandom. I have tried to use an approach that lingers over women's words about their own situations and motivations. Many tensions and questions arise from these chapters, but in this conclusion I return to a recurring binary that arose during my fieldwork: the tension between dangdut koplo and Jakarta. Framing it as such obscures the multiple dynamics that go into creating such a binary, yet the division between the two came up repeatedly in my discussions with singers and other professionals as well as in critical discourse. Jakarta here represents the biggest recording studios and television stations, but it is also the seat of the national government and censorship bodies, centuries of regional tension founded upon ethnic and linguistic differences, and the influence of Rhoma Irama's organization PAMMI (The Association of Indonesian Performers of Melayu Dangdut Music [I. *Persatuan Artis Musik Melayu Dangdut Indonesia*]), which essentially controls which dangdut artists get government

recognition and support. Nowhere does this tension play out more visibly than Jakarta-based dangdut singing competition television.

I first began to watch dangdut singing competition television because I was interested in the women fans who watch nightly. However, I soon began to see that the conflicts playing out onscreen were fundamental ones, throwing into sharp relief the questions explored in earlier chapters. Who a singer *is*, the proper dress, behavior, appearance, and sound according to the desires of Jakarta producers and censorship boards was established and tested each day in front of live audiences and fans all over the nation. Likewise, what dangdut is, its stylistic and genre limits, and the tension between what is popular, what is approved, and by whom and for whom reveals itself in the presences and absences from that stage.

This tension swells as the national government attempts to market dangdut on the global stage. Jealously watching the success of K-pop, dangdut producers, radio hosts, and government officials often discussed dangdut's potential to go international, *mendunia*, or go global. Singers and other industry professionals usually used the English-derived phrase "go *internasional*" when describing this aspiration, though many also used the Indonesian word *mendunia*, a word which turns the word *dunia* (world) into a verb and thus conjures up images of something spreading to cover the face of a globe completely. Scholars have more often preferred the phrase "go global," which seems to better reflect the term *mendunia*, since going international could be fulfilled by a quick stopover in Singapore. Singers perhaps use the phrase "go internasional" because they imagined their own bodies in space, flying to Taiwan or South Korea, rather than

imagining the music itself. I use the phrases “go international,” “go global,” or *mendunia* interchangeably when I discuss the aspirations industry professionals hold for the music as a whole.

National dangdut singing competition television is a telling scene for investigating tensions surrounding dangdut going global, as the friction between audience demand and moral responsibility described in the last chapter come to a head as they are performed on the national stage. In 2017 and 2018, two main possibilities presented themselves; as dangdut koplo became the most popular music in the nation thanks to Via Vallen’s hit song “Sayang,” koplo emerged as the market frontrunner, this despite partially using a local language (“Sayang” is in both Indonesian and Javanese) and being stigmatized by many as overly erotic, with explicit or tacky dancing (even though koplo singers had largely abandoned erotic signature dances years earlier due to changing fashion and demands). On the other hand, government bureaucrats faced pressure from PAMMI and Rhoma Irama to present a version of dangdut in keeping with his style and vision: his songs formed the main repertoire, prioritizing men’s voices, women wearing Islamic head coverings and swaying side to side only. These debates reveal differing visions for the future of dangdut, and, because dangdut is so identified with the *rakyat*, the everyday people, those visions elide into how producers and government officials imagine the future of the Indonesian people.

As Katherine In-Young Lee has written (2018:1), the widespread transmission of music genres in the last two centuries is often explained by sweeping narratives of globalization, media technology, Westernization, neoliberalism, etc., but such narratives

skirt the question of why certain musics go global and others do not. Deborah Wong points out, “ethnomusicologists and musicologists are only slowly beginning to address how and why certain specific musical practices go global” (Wong 2019: 19–20). I argue that dangdut and dangdut koplo represent an opportunity to observe a moment in which stakeholders want the music to go global, but it has not yet happened. Among dangdut industry professionals I observed a suspended desire to use dangdut as soft power, and I use ethnography and close reading of television and concerts to show the debates that have emerged around how to best facilitate that movement abroad. These debates are influenced on one side by Indonesia’s successful history exporting traditional music and dance and by the tantalizing example posed by K-pop on the other. These differing strategies call into question what type of dangdut practice will be reified and even how to define what dangdut *is*. Traditional or cosmopolitan? Islamic or secular? Koplo or klasik? These debates reveal what going global means for different stakeholders as well as their understandings of globalization and media. They are both about visions for global success and about local conflicts between industry tastemakers.

As I have shown in the previous chapters, dangdut koplo practice is intimately tied to women’s bodies in performance. The debates that raged—and continue to rage—around what type of dangdut is most capable of going global focused disproportionately on women’s bodies. What should they look like? What should they wear? Can they accept *saweran*? The image [*I. citra*] of singers is under constant debate. In this conclusion, I consider some of the ways debates over women’s bodies play out in national singing competition television and in government efforts to promote dangdut

abroad. In Jakarta, both industry professionals and government ministries like BEKRAF (the Indonesian Creative Economy Agency [I. *Badan Ekonomi Kreatif*]) attempt to harness dangdut koplo's popularity, but they simultaneously strip it of what made it popular and successful in the first place: the musicians and singers are deemed too low-class to represent the nation, and the song themes are rejected as crude, blasphemous, or regionally-limited. The contest for dangdut stages the debate over what vision of dangdut will rise to prominence to represent the nation and how different stakeholders view the most visible bodies of dangdut: the women onstage.

### **The Arts Make Us One: Dangdut Singing Competitions and National Character**

Ramzi, the lead MC for *Liga Dangdut Indonesia*, appeared on screen with his four cohosts. "Attendees and viewers [...] please let us lower our heads and pray that Indonesia will be safe, peaceful, and harmonious, full of coalition and unity [I. *persatuan dan kesatuan*] among different factions. Let us pray."

The camera scanned the five MCs with their heads bowed.

"Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh. Good evening Indonesia! We're back at the Victory Concert, Liga Dangdut Indonesia, The Arts Make us One [I. *Seni Menyatukan*]!"

The lights dimmed on the MCs as a pre-recorded video played on air. In this final night of competition, Rara, the contestant from South Sumatra, would face off against Selfi, the representative of South Sulawesi. Liga Dangdut, the most recent iteration of dangdut singing competition television at the time, took one contestant from each of Indonesia's thirty-four provinces. Formatted much like a sports league, a win would hold



regional significance since the winner of the whole show could lay claim to the dangdut crown, showing up the usual dangdut powers of Jakarta and Java.

The introductory video ended and a tasting tour of song and dance across the archipelago began. Cutting, shifting, zooming in and out, Liga Dangdut jumped from vignette to vignette of regional folksongs sung by dangdut singers. The camera next showed an outdoor soundstage with three already-eliminated contestants surrounded by dancers. The three singers began to sing “Rambadia,” a children’s folksong from Sumatra. The dancers, dressed in stereotypically Sumatran ethnic clothes, danced along.

Then the camera quickly cut to a second outdoor stage, where one eliminated contestant and two of the show’s guest artists sang “Manuk Dadali,” a West Javanese folksong, while surrounded by dancers dressed in special West Javanese garb.

Again, a cut to a different stage. More eliminated contestants from different regions, this time singing a Balinese folksong with a new backdrop of dancers in Balinese dress and with Balinese choreography. The singers, the majority of whom were not Balinese, looked to each other for the lyrics, making it clear that accurate or meaningful representation of Balinese music and dance was not a priority. Rather, like the empathy plays described in Chapter 4, this was a play of ethnic group representation.

Again and again, the cameras cut to different stages, which were alternately filled with dangdut singers and dancers representing various regions with stereotyped clothes, songs, and dance steps. “Cik Cik Periuk” from West Kalimantan. “Anging Mammiri” to represent South Sulawesi. “Sajojo” to represent West Papua. The last example was especially striking because of the ongoing insurgency West Papuans are

fighting from the Indonesian government, and the fact that no one in the performance appeared to be West Papuan.

To an outside eye, this might appear to be a perfectly innocuous celebration of Indonesian ethnic variety. In Indonesia, a nation often referred to as a nation in waiting, such performances have a long and complicated history rooted in tensions between the centers of political and economic power in Java and Jakarta and the outlying regions. Much like Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, the infamous park which shows off mini versions of regional architecture, ethnic celebration performances have long been used in Indonesia to celebrate Unity in Diversity, a rhetorical move that essentializes, neutralizes and flattens difference by making it consumable. It's as though "It's a Small World" at Disneyland were treated as a factual representation. In reference to New Order elections, Pemberton called similar self-conscious displays "explicitly cultural gesturing" (1994:9) and argued that the obsession with tradition [*I. tradisi*] and authenticity [*I. asli*] were in fact meant to reshape the past and had the impact of displacing questions of power and social class. As the Ministry for Education and Culture sought out examples of traditional local culture to be preserved, exactly such perfect examples of what they sought began to spring up. The intent, much like for the dances described in Chapter 1, was to create stability and a sense of continuity by erasing practices deemed problematic and turning traditional culture into something ahistorical and unchanging.

This project has been at least partially successful, as shown by the degree to which people of my acquaintance accepted and reproduced a stereotypical list of cultural traits for different ethnic groups. The people watching the show, at least in Java, have

largely already accepted this manner of categorizing culture; I cannot count the number of times I was told, when moving from Central to East Java, that the East Javanese were more open and honest—just look at the shape of their traditional hats! The New Order formalized many of these elements and published them in school curricula. I purchased one of these books (Subiakto 2017), which came complete with lists of regional ethnic clothing, dance, weapons, and vernacular architecture for each region, as well as lists and photographs of national heroes. The centerpiece of this book, however, was the national and regional songs. Each of the songs listed above—and many others—were transcribed in Western notation with lyrics, chords, and notes about the region of origin. Paging through the book, the songs appear indistinguishable, and it's possible to flip through all thirty-four regions without recognizing any differences. Likewise, the smiling people on the cover all have the same face, their clothing and hair styling, again drawn from those official lists of tradition, the only distinguishing features. This is the tacit message of Unity in Diversity: a celebration of local “tradition” in the shape of clothing, hairstyles, architecture, food, and music and dance, and the hope that this pageantry erases real cultural, historical differences and conflicts.

At the same time, just as with the reformed dance discussed in Chapter 1, this process of folklorization leaves ritual feeling ungrounded. John Pemberton describes how during the New Order village rituals that once included an offering to a specific place guardian were altered to direct the offering to *tradisi* itself. But what offering does one give to tradition? As cultural practices shifted to better satisfy what the government expected, they left behind, ironically, a feeling of traditionlessness. Pemberton writes,

This haunting sense of incompleteness so pervasive in New Order cultural discourse has the effect, then, of motivating an almost endless production of offerings, a constant rearticulation of things cultural, in an attempt to make up for what may have been left out in the process of recovering “tradition.” [...] Tradisi itself has emerged as a kind of meta-spook endowed with a profound appetite that virtually guarantees the reproduction of devotedly cultural desires, that is, the desire for culture. (Pemberton 1994:11).

The pageantry of cultural elements, though widely reproduced, remains fundamentally unsatisfying because it is both often superficial and co-opted to maintain power. *Liga Dangdut* gives lip service to a wide variety of local traditions, but leaves viewers feeling traditionless because of its reliance on empty, symbolic gestures. With the end of the New Order, the hunt for local tradition has taken on new urgency as democracy shifts from a performative festival (Pemberton 1994:9) to a sometimes-uncomfortable reality. Real democracy has at times seemed to heighten tensions, particularly ethnic and religious tensions, as moral panics, anti-Christian and anti-Chinese terrorist attacks, and separatist movements have wracked different sections of this “Improbable” (Pisani 2015) “nation in waiting” (Schwarz 1999).<sup>53</sup> With its competition format, *Liga Dangdut* combined the ethnic pageantry made common by the New Order with the semi-democratic format of the singing competition show. As described above, the format showcases ethnic diversity before subsuming it into dangdut music, an ostensibly national music form. The MCs announced this goal when, several times over the show’s five-hour nightly running time, they shouted “Seni Menyatukan.” *Seni* is art, or perhaps more accurately the arts, an unusual term for dangdut, a music that receives its share of scorn.

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<sup>53</sup> I owe my awareness of the phenomenon of books referring to post-New Order Indonesia as an incomplete state to Richard Fox, who brought it to my attention in conversation. I no longer remember what the conversation was about, but the idea that so many interpret Indonesia as an almost-state was striking to me as a researcher on Java.

Calling dangdut competition *seni* is an argument for its artistic merit and value.

*Menyatukan* refers to a process of merging into a single entity. The Arts will Make us One, they claim, all regional difference covered by the celebration of classic dangdut.

In this conclusion, I raise some final questions about how tensions explored in earlier chapters play out on the national and international dangdut stage. Dangdut television can be interpreted as part of a nation-building project and women are both a central subject of that debate—their bodies, sexuality, work, and fandom—and central participants. Nor do all the participants take the same position; women are contributors on multiple sides of the debate. I demonstrate how, because of the nation-building project of dangdut television, dangdut practice and bodies on-air are modified to fit visions for the nation promoted by studio executives and government officials. These visions are often influenced by stereotypes the Jakarta elite hold about dangdut singers and fans, including disdain for the value of singer's labor, moral anxiety about eroticism, and paternalistic beliefs about socio-economic class. I also explore how these views impact attempts by mass media and government alike to use dangdut to promote Indonesian culture abroad, or to “go international.” Women singers, whose voices and bodies dominate off-air dangdut practice and whose creative, artistic, and charismatic contributions drive it, must be tamed before they can serve as appropriate representatives of the nation. Thus, producers and government agencies attempt to harness singers' power while scorning, altering, and often replacing individual women. Dangdut television contests are thus also contests for who owns dangdut music itself, and, by extension, the attention of the *rakyat*.

### **Pantura and Koplo on the National Television Stage: Erotics and Ethnicity**

Because bringing dangdut koplo to television makes public a performance that usually takes place in villages, clubs, or private homes, producers feel they must excise erotic performance from the music. *KDI's* (*Kontes Dangdut Indonesia*, or Indonesian Dangdut Contest) production team explicates this line of thinking in their official statements of purpose, which includes the goal of promoting dangdut singers that have a “different image” [I. *citra berbeda*] from other dangdut singers (*KDI Official Website*). Many producers I met echoed a similar sentiment. Andre at Radio Muara Jakarta told me, “Dangdut has huge potential to become popular internationally, but it must be done by different, higher class dangdut singers with an international image” (personal comments, July 2018).<sup>54</sup> This “different image” is explicitly tied to women’s bodies and erotics. Producers and government officials only hinted at what, exactly, that “different image” is, but what the phrase implies is clear: the average dangdut singer has little formal education and low socio-economic status. A singer with a different image must not be that. Instead of the confident, animated *artis* of the live koplo stage, dangdut television asks for refined singing technique, higher social class, modest and polite bearing, and glamorous full-length gowns that make movement difficult. She must be attractive without being erotic. Cleansing the erotics from dangdut forms only one part of a broader strategy to make dangdut go international. Televised dangdut thus bears little resemblance to off-air practice. What dangdut is—the essence of the genre—as well as

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<sup>54</sup> “Dangdut itu mempunyai potensi besar buat mendunia [...] tetapi dangdut itu harus dibawakan penyanyi dangdut yang berbeda, yang berkelas dan citra internasional.”

who owns it, are constantly being contested to promote images of the nation and the rakyat in accordance with the wishes of producers, advertisers, and censorship boards.

#### Via Vallen at the Indonesian Choice Awards

Via Vallen's performance at the Indonesian Choice Awards was meant to be the pinnacle of dangdut koplo's rise to power, but when I first watched it—through a YouTube video sent by a fellow dangdut fan—I felt confused and disappointed. While I was thrilled for Via Vallen's recognition and what that meant for dangdut koplo, I recognized little of the music practice I'd experienced every day for the last year.

According to Michael Raditya, Wishnutama, the director of NET.TV, where the Indonesian Choice Awards were held, invited Via Vallen because he considered her to be “the best.” At the same time, he stated that his “homework” was to make dangdut koplo more “modern” [*I. masa kini*] (Raditya 2018). And indeed, NET.TV conjured a new vision of dangdut koplo to fit the event, which also invited international celebrities like Haille Steinfeld. Via Vallen would sing “Sayang,” which was the biggest hit of 2018. Its provenance was fraught from the beginning. After Via Vallen's success, the dangdut hip-hop group NDX protested that they had written the song and deserved some credit and fame. Fans quickly uncovered the fact that “Sayang” took its melody from the 1988 Japanese pop song “Mirai e” by Kiroro. In 2010, that song was covered by Chinese artist Rene Liu. In 2012, Indonesian Antonius Sutanto rewrote the Chinese version into “Cinta Abadi,” which NDX then altered by adding some rap sections and dangdut instrumentation and rhythms. In fact, several of the dangdut koplo hits from 2017–2018 took their melodies directly from Chinese and Japanese pop. The situation is further

complicated by dangdut koplo live practice, in which every band and *artis* puts their own spin on the latest hits.

The video begins with lights up on a massive three-platform stage filled with backup dancers in sleek black suits, white shirts, and ties. As the state-of-the-art blue and yellow rotating LED lights flashed, a pre-recorded dangdut kendang and suling boomed over the speakers, occasionally interspersed with high-energy synthesized drums and chords reminiscent of a Final Fantasy videogame or a gameshow, designed to amp the audience up. The band is nowhere to be seen—the entire track was prerecorded. The audience, to whom the camera repeatedly cuts, is made up mostly of Indonesian celebrities dressed glamorously for the awards show, seen screaming with excitement and breaking into *joget*, sending the message that dangdut koplo is elite and enjoyable by all.

As the intro fades, Via Vallen appears from behind two dancers. The crowd roars as she sings the first line: “Sayang, opo kowe krungu jerite atiku/mengharap engkau kembali” (Sweetheart, do you hear the cry of my heart/hoping that you return?). With light accompaniment, Via Vallen’s voice is strong and rich as she emerges from the shadows, highlighted in bright white light. She wears a loose blue pantsuit, white collared shirt, and white sneakers. The dancers kneel around her. The audience sings along, audible on the recording, especially after Via Vallen invites them to sing the next line: “Sayang, nganti memuteh rambut ku/ra bakal luntur tresnoku” (Sweetheart, until my hair turns white/my love won’t fade away). On this most popular refrain, a string accompaniment soars behind the vocals.



From that moment, however, the song transforms with a completely new musical mix: a guitar plays bar chords under a synthesized orchestral accompaniment, which pulses, emphasizing completely different beats from the original and introducing new chord progressions. NET.TV had hired a man named Ronald Steven, a music producer and bass player famous for arranging award show music, showcases, and advertisements. Steven had no experience with dangdut or koplo, and his musical interventions fundamentally changed the character of the sound. As Raditya points out, the lovely chord progressions “are not in keeping with the koplo spirit [...] dangdut koplo chord progressions are not complicated and leave space for drum improvisation, *senggakan* [rhythmic chants like “Oh Ah Oh Eh!”], and dance” (Raditya 2018) as well as, I would add, improvisation from the singer and clarity of text delivery. Even the kendang beat feels off, lacking the energy of a koplo beat; Wishnutama, the director of NET.TV, instructed the arranger Juned Takdut throughout the recording process, and the resulting kendang sound is closer to classic dangdut than koplo, creating some jarring rhythmic differences from the original, with *senggakan* in strange new positions. Finally, during the main rap section of the song, Via Vallen invites established rapper Boy William to the stage. Instead of performing that section herself, as she had onstage for months, Via Vallen dances along mutely, one of her skills deemed unnecessary for pop stardom.

As Raditya points out, critical responses to this performance were overwhelmingly positive. Many called it evidence of dangdut having class or raising its social class standing [I. *berkelas, naik kelas*]. Similarly, dangdut koplo artists themselves expressed pride and excitement. Many knew Via Vallen personally and were happy for

her success and what it represented for them, dangdut koplo artists and musicians, who had been so heavily stigmatized by Rhoma Irama and PAMMI in the aftermath of Inulmania.

But I'm struck by what producers felt they had to change to make the music palatable. First, there's Via Vallen herself. Her smooth, husky voice remains unchanged, but her clothing reflects none of the styles then popular on koplo stages; neither the relaxed casual of daytime performances nor the over-the-top glam of shows at weddings. Via Vallen's clothing was an object of interest even before this performance; Edi Dwi Riyanto and Anita Sartika Dewi credit Via Vallen's modest clothing and *goyang*-less performance to Via Vallen's own virtue and ability to resist the temptation of eroticism (2021:71), though I argue that Via Vallen's style and dance merely reflected shifts that had been happening in dangdut koplo for the previous eight years. By 2018, no singers I knew on the koplo circuit had a signature *goyang*, least of all an erotic one, and singers who did choose to brand themselves as erotic risked marginalizing the most popular bands. Even in dangdut clubs that served alcohol, a refined floor-length black dress with a knee-length slit was more common than tube tops. Yet for those who spend little time with off-air koplo, for whom Inul Daratista was perhaps the most recent star in memory, Via Vallen's style might have seemed unusual. Her clothing at the Indonesian Choice Awards, however, was a true departure from dangdut koplo style, as a baggy blue suit obscures her figure and lends a hip-hop feel to the performance; yet her skill as a rapper is essentially silenced. Similarly, the loud, busy arrangement with its complex and

surprising chord structure force Via Vallen to sing louder, her usual relaxed energy and presence frantic and tired.

The elaborate production is the biggest change. It threatens to overwhelm both Via Vallen and the charm of the song. Dozens of backup dancers fill the stage, and the lighting system is state-of-the-art. Most notably, the band is completely absent, replaced by a pre-recorded mix, just as elaborate as the dancing and lights. Even dangdut competition shows always use a house band, and improvisation between the jury and band is one of such show's most entertaining features. The lack of the band—indeed, the seeming lack of any professional dangdut koplo musicians save Via Vallen herself—does not only create some jarring musical differences. It also raises the question why, reminding me of what Gita said about koplo musicians in Chapter 5: that they are often unable to read situations, that they do not know how to behave, that they are not used to the pressures of television. While my research focuses on the gendered aspects of dangdut television's political goals—partly because, as a woman, it was socially more accepted and comfortable for me to spend time with women than with men—just as women's bodies have to be disciplined on television, prejudice against the men of low social standing who make up most dangdut koplo bands means they are often replaced with university-educated pit bands and music arrangers. The musicians who create and innovate in dangdut koplo are more likely to have backgrounds selling snacks from a cart than they are to be university-educated, and many Jakarta producers show disdain for their musical work by simply removing them from the equation. Similarly, the audience is replaced here. The Jakarta celebrities enjoying dangdut koplo serve to legitimize it in

certain circles, something the mass of fans designated by Ika, Gita, and others as class B and C never could do.

Bringing Pantura to the Studio: *Bintang Pantura* at Indosiar.

The dressing rooms below the Indosiar stage were bare and hot, a shocking contrast to the freezing and light-filled studio above. I stood awkwardly in the corner as Fitri Carlina, a dangdut star from Banyuwangi, East Java, put the finishing touches on her makeup (Figure 81). Having toured extensively in East Java herself before a smash hit sent her to Jakarta, Fitri Carlina was one of the few people who defended my research topic to Jakarta producers.



*Figure 81: Fitri Carlina puts the finishing touches on her makeup at Indosiar's studios. July 2018. Photo by the author.*

“Andrea is studying the *real* dangdut,” she told someone backstage who asked why anyone would be interested in dangdut koplo. “Out there on the road.”

Since the success of her single “ABG Tua,” or “Old Person who Acts like a Teenager,” Fitri Carlina had maintained a position with Wonderful Indonesia, one of the BEKRAF programs discussed above, promoting tourism to her home region of

Banyuwangi. In this position, she performed dangdut for visiting guests and abroad as a kind of cultural envoy.

Tonight, however, she was serving as a jury member on the Indosiar show *Bintang Pantura*. She stared into her mirror surrounded by the soft hum of selfie lights as an assistant snapped away behind her with a camera, creating a faux-selfie aesthetic. Fitri checked the photos, then turned to me and nodded. “It’s time to go up, sweetheart,” she told me.

It was the middle of July 2018, and the show *Bintang Pantura* was broadcasting its fifth season live on Indosiar. I was there to see how dangdut koplo would be translated to the national television stage. Unlike other Indosiar dangdut competition shows, which limit the repertoire to classic dangdut, *Bintang Pantura* allows repertoire from dangdut koplo and celebrates dance. While the title of the show translates to “Star of Pantura,” the north coast region discussed in Chapter 3, in *Bintang Pantura*, contestants come from all over Indonesia to audition for a spot on a coach’s team. That night, four contestants were on: two from East Java, one from West Java, and one from South Sumatera. Each contestant was required to present a dance to the judges and audience during their audition song. If any Jakarta-based show were to represent dangdut koplo values, this would be it.

I followed Fitri Carlina up the stairs and to the backstage area, where she set her shoes on the floor and slipped into them, growing a full six inches in height. Her assistants were simultaneously sewing the back of her skin-tight blue satin dress together (Figure 82). The producer, a slim woman with a short, trendy haircut, bounded up to us.

“Are you ready?” she asked me.

“Ready!”

“Are you sure your visa is in order?”

I replied that I was sure.



*Figure 82: Fitri Carlina and Rosalina (another jury member) wait backstage while an assistant sews Fitri Carlina into her dress. Photo by the author.*

There are two types of audience members for shows like *Liga Dangdut* and *Bintang Pantura*. Most of the audience is made up of supporters for particular contestants. They often travel from far to support their contestant, and usually came from the same city or village. The camera shot these sections of the audience constantly, and for a contestant to secure a large, energized support group was essential. As discussed in Chapter 4, show gimmicks—goofy or melancholy skits between performances, led by the

MCs—would often feature interviews with audience members, gifts of local fabric or food for the judges and team leaders, and performances of chants or local dances. The other type of audience member is local Jakartan. Unbeknownst to me before attending live, and likely to other at-home viewers, these audience members stand in the front throughout the night and are paid to attend and dance. Unlike supporters of particular contestants, these audience members are rarely shown directly by the camera. They are usually only seen in wide shots as the lights dim for a performance, their bodies transforming into a mass of moving parts in the shadows. They fill space but do not speak. I was seated in the section for the former type of audience (Figure 83).





*Figure 83: The view from the audience at Bintang Pantura 5. Photo by the author.*

Lesti, Indosiar’s sweetheart, kicked off the night to promote her new album. She sang a duet with fellow dangdut contestant Fildan, choosing one of the koplo hits of the year: “Jaran Goyang,” “The Rocking Horse,” a song about love magic, curses, and murder. They enthusiastically launched into the song and the audience responded with joy to finally hear one of the big hits on Indosiar instead of the normal fare of classic

dangdut. They forgave Lesti and Fildan for struggling with the passages of rapid-fire rapping in Javanese, a language which neither of them speak.

After fifteen minutes of the requisite gimmicks, the MCs introduced the first potential contestant: Eka Ariana from Brebes, East Java, who would later place fourth overall. Obscured by a screen that allowed only her silhouette to shine through, she began to sing the smooth *cengkok* of “Muskurane,” a song in Hindi from the Bollywood hit *CityLights*. As the song began to pick up, she emerged from behind the screen to *joget* lightly with the jury members, hoping one of them would select her for their team.

“Mami, can I go up?” Eka Ariana asks after the first verse and refrain. She walks past the jury into the audience, where a raised platform has been erected. In her full-length gold gown, she struggles to get up the stairs. Standing on the platform, she reaches down to pull the dress out of the heels of her shoes where it has gotten stuck, and tells the audience,

“I have this dance. It’s called *goyang doubles*. Do you know it? Look.” She crouches down and circles her hips, first in a delicate light rotation, then in a wide sweep. She invites the whole audience to join, then asks permission to descend from the platform and finish the song. Two jury members push their buzzers, indicating they want her on their team.

*Bintang Pantura* attempts to capture the essence of regional dangdut like koplo and tarling, but ultimately is limited by its own genre as well as censorship and regulation. While *Bintang Pantura* attempts to showcase all the performance capabilities of an *artis*, including dance and stage presence, it is still a singing competition show, and

outstanding vocals take prominence in a way that isn't the case on koplo stages. Similarly, though the *Bintang Pantura* showcases dance, it does so in a way that is both artificially formal and archaic. Introducing a dance to the audience is reminiscent of the early 2000s when dangdut koplo performers had signature dances, a practice that fell out of favor by the early 2010s. Likewise, the separation of dance from voice through the use of a formal platform shows the artificiality of portrayals of dance in on dangdut singing competition television. Not unlike the ethnic groups in *Liga Dangdut*, dance on *Bintang Pantura* is essentialized, given a special stage, sanitized, and immediately dropped. The clothing of the contestants, by necessity the height of glamour, also prevents the kind of active movement needed on koplo stages. It's little surprise, then, that so many active dangdut koplo stars do poorly on the *Bintang Pantura* stage. Their skillset is not truly valued there.

### **Going Global**

Nasha Aquila, Paijo, and I sat in the Royal Plaza mall, picking at the remains of seafood platters. We had just come from the *Stasiun Dangdut* studio, and Nasha, already changed into a casual top and jeans, chattered enthusiastically about her career while I scribbled rapidly in my notebook to keep up.

Andrea: So you've already won competitions. What do you hope for your career in the future?

Nasha: Yeah, shoring it up! Just pushing on, *loh*.

Paijo: International.

Nasha: [looking at Paijo and considering] Go international. That's what I want most. Or maybe to America, to your house. It's like this. I've sung with orkes, I've performed at weddings, *organ tunggal* (a singer accompanied only by a keyboard), all of that. I've been a *bintang tamu* (guest star) at those, middle class, middle class to the top [I. *kelas menengah ke atas*]. Before that, I performed for the lowest, lowest class. Process, process, process, yeah? To raise myself up.

Andrea: From *organ tunggal* to *bintang tamu* at fancy performances.

Nasha: Yeah. Right now I perform with the biggest orkes. I'm even invited to *Stasiun Dangdut*.

In 2018, everyone was talking about dangdut going international. As a newly famous dangdut koplo superstar, Via Vallen had just recorded the theme for the 2018 Asian games, a moment of legitimation for dangdut koplo professionals and fans alike who felt they at last might be recognized. While many singers like Nasha Aquila now wanted their careers to go international, other stakeholders had different motivations. Producers and other industry professionals imagined dangdut as Indonesia's answer to K-pop, while government officials, drawing on long-standing history governments and "Javaphiles" alike using music and dance to represent Indonesia in general and Java in particular to the outside world (Spiller 2015: 11), considered framing dangdut as traditional music and folding it into existing structures of cultural diplomacy. The Hello Dangdut program, for example, states that "making dangdut as a key element of Indonesian music identity in the eyes of the international community" is its main goal. Indonesian music producer Rissa Asnan, who has lived in the US since the 1980s, founded Dangdut in America to teach Americans to sing dangdut (Wreksono 2018). Neither strategy has had much success so far at helping dangdut go global, though Dangdut in America is consistently viral in Indonesia.

Why do some music genres go global while others do not? Several ethnomusicologists have offered possibilities. Many discussed the "world beat" or "world music" trend of the 1980s and 1990s, analyzing these popular music genres as sites in which music industries in Europe and the United States appropriate non-Western musical

traditions with an exoticist gaze or take sole ownership rights over collaborations in an imperialist project (Erlmann 1996; Feld 1988, 2000; Garofalo 1993; Meintjes 1990). Others have observed more complex arrangements of exoticism, diaspora, hybridization, and localization in which power relationships were less one-sided (Bigenho 2012; Spiller 2015). Mina Yang provocatively discusses the impacts related forces have had on Western classical music (2014). In contrast, Fiona Magowan considers the materiality of musical instruments, arguing that in cases the like didjeridu, objects themselves attract layers of meaning (2005:98). Katherine In-Young Lee points out that most of these analyses focus on socio-political reasons for the spread of a music genre, and argues that musical characteristics may play a role, as certain rhythmic forms make music easier to enter and access for music enthusiasts who are both outsiders and lack formal musical training (2018:2). This may explain why percussive musics with accessible forms (e.g. gamelan, *taiko*, hip-hop, and *samul nori*, rather than *sasando*, *min'yō*, or other complex string, reed, or vocal genres). It is telling that, when gamelan travels, the vocal, string, and flutes lines, with their much more complicated technical requirements and rhythm form, travel last and are often the purvey of “ringers” in university classrooms.

I am not fully satisfied by any of the above explanations. I recognize that exoticism and capitalism are certainly part of the picture but cannot explain alone why one music or instrument goes global and not another. Lee’s argument has merit but focuses more on the processes that occur when musics marked as traditional travel and the classroom, where an amateur might take up the music. Rhythmic forms are a good explanation when an untrained amateur outsider is trying to *play* but does not account

well for music going global when the point is to *listen*. It's telling that, even in how ethnomusicologists have so far evaluated music going global, the popular and traditional take different avenues. The example of dangdut shows how such categories may reflect processes more than inherent elements. Popular music thus deserves its own separate exploration.

Arguably the earliest and most notable examples of popular music going global were related to Black diasporic music. Paul Gilroy argues that black musics and aesthetics spread because of the transnational forces of the Atlantic slave trade and the resulting black diaspora, and black music globally formed countercultures to European supremacy, and black musicians as a “priestly class” of “midwives” (Gilroy 1993:76–77). “The musics of the black Atlantic world were the primary expressions of cultural distinctiveness which this population seized upon and adapted to its new circumstances” (1993:81–82). But, as Gilroy points out, many such musics, with reggae as a prime example, were “detached from their original ethnic markers and historical origins, exported and adapted, with evident respect but little sentimentality, to local needs and political climates” (1993:82–83), and especially rearticulated to the conditions of the oppressor. Similarly, Rashida K. Braggs writes that jazz diasporas, defined as cultural spaces in which migrating African American jazz musicians and listeners could negotiate and explore racialized and national identities, were made possible by European negrophilia, defined as “an exoticizing and objectifying desire for African and African-diasporic culture” (Braggs 2016:9). At the same time, musicians and listeners were transnational and globally conscious, not just because of the forces of the Atlantic slave

trade, but also because of deliberate migratory experiences to Europe for education and artistic communities (Braggs 2016:7). Already from this example we see that going global can result in increased opportunity and respect for musicians and added vibrance, but can also mean objectification, stereotyping, and separation from their roots.

K-pop is perhaps the most salient example of popular music going global, both because dangdut industry professionals were constantly discussing it in 2018, and because, as JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay (2014) argue, K-pop's ability to move from national sensation to global phenomenon is an exception to the history of popular world music, which has most often been commodified by producers in the US, Europe, or Japan. The boom started with South Korean *Hallyu* television dramas from the 1990s, often featuring pop stars and music. Since the late 1990s, the South Korean government designated creative industries as a key sector for growth, provided tax benefits, and supported overseas expansion. As Emma Baulch points out, patterns of media deregulation in Asia in the 1990s and 2000s “yielded new kinds of content that identified Asia as a prime site of the global modern (rather than derivative of a global modernity with its source elsewhere), as well as new domestic and in some cases transnational markets for such content” (Baulch 2020:2). Early boy bands and girl bands in South Korea focused on visual presentation—clothing and choreography—more than sound, and music video production was outsourced to professionals in advertising and film to ensure high quality. Choi and Maliangkay argue that K-pop reprocesses Western musical sounds like R&B with a Korean spin, but that K-pop today is transnational, with lyrics in multiple languages and artists flocking to the industry from all over the world. Talent and

production companies also form partnerships with other talent and production companies in Asia and the US; the company YS Entertainment even filmed a K-pop training reality competition that was shown for one season on Indosiar.

What allowed K-pop to go global? On one hand, Choi and Maliangkay argue that idols themselves and their position in a mass and new media industry that puts them at the center of television, film, and music makes K-pop ubiquitously available and stimulating. The idol system has come to dominate popular media. They write,

To the South Korean government and people alike, K-pop and its representative idols are arguably most treasured national assets [...] As these instances suggests, K-pop artistes/idols are the fulcrum of what might be termed an entertainment–diplomatic complex. The quality of K-pop as an all-round medium cannot be properly grasped when perceived as a mere subgenre of popular music. It is a nascent form of augmented entertainment with substantial impact on public/state affairs for the cultural parvenu that South Korea is (Choi and Maliangkay 2014:5–6).

This interpretation focuses on industry strategy and government support. Chuyun Oh, in contrast, points out that K-pop relies heavily on hip-hop, R&B, and other Black diasporic music genres. Choi and Maliangkay agree that using genres that have already gone global and reframing them as Korean contributes to the appeal. Dredge Byung’chu Käng echoes that for gay Thai men K-pop represents a developed Asia and a music option that is not either Western or local. In this lens, “K-pop cover dance can be read as both an aspiration for development and the instantiation of participation in a new cosmopolitan Asia” (2014:560). This interpretation certainly holds sway in K-pop’s regional success.

Fandom structures and social media also contribute to K-pop’s global success. Choi and Maliangkay point to industry structures that promote commodification. They credit K-pop’s success in part to a “post-Fordist mode of production” (Choi and



Maliangkay 2014:7) in which producers make many items that are actually very similar to one another and then encourage competing fan clubs to enact emotional rivalries. “It can even be argued that K-pop is a meta-commodity that can commodify a host of other cultural goods as pseudo avatars of K-pop idols” (Choi and Maliangkay 2014:8). In contrast, Oh argues that anything going global is caught up in global power dynamics, but practitioners are more concerned with bodily sensation and pleasure than such dynamics (Oh 2014:125).

These scholars have proposed many factors that contribute to music going global. In this section, I explore how industry stakeholders in dangdut and dangdut koplo conceptualize the process of going global and the different strategies they envision depending on their own aspirations, needs, and ideas about the world and music industries. Two visions and strategies dominated in 2018: the first, a strategy that referred to dangdut as Indonesian traditional music and replicated the cultural tourism and heritage techniques used to promote gamelan and dance. The second aimed to define dangdut as a popular music and imitate the strategies used for K-pop (or their understanding of those strategies). While both visions attempt to build off the success and visibility of dangdut koplo, neither take into account why dangdut koplo is popular in the first place or what koplo artists, writers, and musicians want.

In July of 2018, Fitri Carlina and I visited Radio Muara Jakarta. Originally there only as an onlooker, I was eventually invited up to the stage, where Fitri Carlina and I discussed the potential for dangdut to go international with host Andre. A dangdut koplo singer from Banyuwangi who had moved to Jakarta after signing a record deal with the

label Nagaswara, Fitri Carlina was on a press tour celebrating her recent concert in South Korea, touted as the first international dangdut festival in Korea, where she'd performed for a crowd mostly composed of Indonesian domestic workers. This tour lauded her efforts as part of broader efforts to help dangdut "go international." In a later-published press release about the tour, she referenced the popularity of the song "Lagi Syantik," which had been covered in English and Korean by the K-pop group GTI, who specialize in Indonesian covers. Fitri Carlina gushes, "So dangdut has really been accepted, not only by the stratum of Indonesian society, but also by the world" ("Fitri Carlina bangga"). She reflects that because they collaborated with Korean musicians too, the collaboration is not only musical but also cultural. By stating this, Fitri Carlina is making a claim about her own effectiveness and the impact of her program in spreading dangdut koplo abroad.

At the radio station, Fitri Carlina and her manager explained how their production team had worked to ensure the highest possible quality to radio show host Andre (Figure 84).

Fitri Carlina's Manager: One goal was for production to have higher quality. For example, we have higher quality lighting, good spotlights, we use multi-media.

Fitri Carlina: Yes, and the stage is better.

Manager: Yes, a really good stage. And the *artis* are all truly quality *artis* [I. *berkualitas* (literally, have quality)]. And not one among them takes *saweran*.

Andre: Aha! That's key.

Fitri Carlina: [laughs] Even though they're upset about it! "It wouldn't be a problem, right? It's just a little bit, for shopping!"



Figure 84: The author with Fitri Carlina and show host Andre, July 2018. Photo courtesy of Fitri Carlina.

This was a common refrain; just as television competition shows promise singers with a “different image,” for dangdut to go international, the *artis* has to be the right type. And just as that different image is inferred and not explicated, the “quality” expected of an *artis* is most often defined by what she does *not* do: wear certain clothing, dance erotically, etc. The term *kualitas* here implies social class as well as singing and entertaining ability; it does not specify what qualities she must have, but instead serves as a cipher for the argument that most singers do *not* have quality. This is most evident later in the conversation, when Fitri Carlina’s manager gives an example of what it means to not have quality. He brings up *saweran* as an undesirable thing for a woman singer to do, as though whether or not *saweran* is offered and accepted is the singer’s decision alone and not the result of extension negotiations between manager and the event patron.

Ignorance about koplo practice led them to focus on the singer above all. Everyone seemed to be waiting for the right singer, and her rightness was defined more by social class than by skill or even beauty.

Many television and radio producers, as well as singers, look to K-pop as an example of dangdut's potential reach. They compare strategies and practices. As described in Chapter 2, Andre focused on singers' bodies as an important component in the appeal of K-pop. "They can't get above fifty-four kilograms, or they're out," he told me. "And they have to do what their managers say."

Singers like Fitri Carlina have different beliefs about suitable singers. Despite her discourse of cultural exchange, Fitri Carlina mainly used narratives of going international to support her own career, sending out press releases about her concerts in Japan and Korea and posting selfies on Instagram with her husband, a pilot for Garuda airlines. When I told her that I thought she was a good representative of dangdut koplo abroad, she deferentially replied, "There have been many others who have represented dangdut abroad. It's not just me. But I hope we all can work together to promote dangdut." Fitri Carlina is careful to avoid the appearance of self-interest—she was always careful to frame her work as for the benefit of dangdut, Banyuwangi, or Indonesia rather than for her career. And yet I have rarely seen someone work harder and with more focus. Singers who want to go international do not usually fault themselves or each other. Their careers are more precarious than those of Jakarta bureaucrats or music producers. Rather than focusing on what makes a suitable singer, they emphasize the need for higher production value and more government support in order to emulate K-pop.

Others besides Fitri Carlina are more explicit about their orientation towards K-pop style. In June 2021, five young women who had found fame on different seasons of Indosiar dangdut singing competition shows formed a group called Byoode (pronounced like beauty). The distribution company 3D Entertainment called their first single, “Jangan Coba Coba,” or “Don’t Even Try It,” dangdut-K-pop. One of the five women, Rara, who competed on the first season of Liga Dangdut and placed second, just above Arif (see Chapter 4), is quoted as saying, “This song is really from the genre K-pop, even though we’re children of dangdut, so we added a little bit of dangdut *cengkok*, especially in Meli’s part.” Nia, who reached the top six of season three of Liga Dangdut, continued, “The point is, dangdut can work with many different genres of music, and with this song we’ve proven that” (3D Entertainment 2021; Taofik 2021).

The woman-empowerment-centered lyrics, designer outfits, and high production value of the music video all reflect a desire to emulate K-pop. Dressed in bright, modern, colors and glamorous styles that showcase their unique characters, Rara and the other four singers take over an airstrip in the music video. The lyrics, delivered in pop vocal technique (and a brief rap) preach empowerment for women, claiming “Byoode stands up for all.”

Mereka bilang kami kaum yang lemah	They say we’re the half that’s weak
Yang hanya bisa diam saja di rumah	Who can only sit quiet in the house
Tak punya mimpi, tak ada posisi	Have no dreams, have no position
Jangan main-main, karena ku bisa buktikan	Don’t play around, because I’ll prove myself.

Alternating singing the lead part in K-pop style, they execute a series of K-pop-inspired dance moves one YouTube commenter describes as taken directly from Blackpink.<sup>55</sup> Quick cuts, slow motion, flashing lights, and the helicopters in the background showcase the high production value (Figure 85). Except for a few *cengkok* delivered by Meli, some barely noticeable snippets of dangdut kendang drumming, and any knowledge a viewer might have of the background of the singers themselves, dangdut is essentially absent.



Figure 85: Promotion image for the music video. Copyright 3D Entertainment.

I love this song. It's delightfully catchy and espouses an overtly feminist message I support. The colors, clothing, and dance moves are all easy on the eyes. I am thrilled for

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<sup>55</sup> An account called Center in Runway posted in July 2021, "Dancenya diperbaiki lagi, gak kompak. Suara dah ok, koreonya bener2 gaasing, kayak semuanya ambil dari Blackpink iya gasi? Gue sebenarnya gak pernah nuduh2 grup Indonesia yang lain kek starbe, dreamgirls ke Blackpink gak sama sekali karena mereka punya ciri khas sendiri dan itu kreatif. Ini berdasarkan penglihatan gue koreonya Blackpink banget. Sorry yang ngefans jangan naik pitam yah, soalnya gue tau banget koreo bp gimana. Klo mirip satu dua gerakan sih gapapa, ini banyak." The comment has received three hundred likes at time of writing, including responses that claim Byoode had only two days to rehearse.

the young women involved, some of whose careers I have watched grow for years. All five are powerhouse singers, something few K-pop groups can boast.

And yet. I think of the singers I know who are not darlings of the Jakarta production scene. What will it mean for them if this version of dangdut becomes the most visible and accepted? I fear that efforts to make dangdut more K-pop are not so different from efforts to make dangdut more Islamic, polite, or instructive. Both efforts reflect a top-down approach that, rather than listening to audiences (or, indeed, grassroots practitioners), assumes what they want or need.

Going international has its naysayers too: those who doubt doing so is possible and those who simply do not care beyond their own careers. Many naysayers are dangdut radio or television producers themselves. Gita and Ika, featured in the previous chapter, both fell into this category. In our discussion at Radio Wijaya, music director Ika emphasized the potential for shame, embarrassment, and failure in promoting dangdut globally. I include several minutes of our conversation here to show how she works through her thoughts about dangdut's potential to go international. She transitions through a range of opinions and emotions that demonstrate the complexity of the effort and the moment, as well as the stakes of going global.

Andrea: Right now in Jakarta, there's a lot of talk about dangdut's potential to go international. Do you have an opinion about that?

Ika: Uh, just that...dangdut going global [I. *mendunia*], what's the goal? Right now they're all busy with, what, that one song [Ika refers to "Merai Bintang," sung by Via Vallen, which became the theme of the 2018 Asian Games]! But in my opinion, dangdut still can't be carried outside of Indonesia. Why? Because of the nation [I. *bangsa*]. It always comes back to the nation. Indonesia can't yet, I don't know why not, maybe because of the cost, I don't know. Truthfully it makes my head hurt, how could it get to the outside world. Maybe outsiders just don't know yet. They don't know, actually dangdut is this, what the true dangdut is like.

But maybe they will like it when they hear it, even if it's just because it's different to them. "Yeah, weird music," maybe it'll only go that far. But those that really love dangdut, maybe they'll be able to go global because they make it known. Maybe especially if they get support from social media. Right now, "Lagi Syantik," stars from Korea have already covered it [GTI, a K-pop group of Indonesia-based Koreans, had just performed their cover on Indosiar a few nights before]. And then people ask about it. But it only goes that far of course. And that'll disappear on its own. That's just my opinion.

Andrea: Yeah. Do you think it's because the nation doesn't have the infrastructure for it, or what?

Ika: That's one reason. We don't, what's the phrase, when we talk about it, we feel like it's a non-starter. Really, if we're talking about going global, it's true that nothing like dangdut exists out there. Just imagine if there was support from the government, maybe it could happen, it could materialize, recognizing dangdut that is the true dangdut, that is capable of delivering different teachings. But maybe that's just a dream, because this, this, *this* is the music, yeah? If we want to speak of exercise, for example, why not run the way of Muhammad [Ika refers to Lalu Muhammad Zohri, an Indonesian track and field sprinter and the only Asian man to win a medal at the IAAF World U20 Championships]? If social media isn't capable, maybe the government can make it happen, right? This is for just one field. Dangdut makes me think like this. It has to be like this. Actually, government support is necessary. But who will...? Complex.

Andrea: I've heard that at BEKRAF there are people who want to support dangdut going global, but they say they're not responsive. Or that they're not serious about the project or working hard on it.

Ika: They don't know! They don't know what dangdut is. Yeah, right? We're back here again, right? This is what I mean. If the government wants to probe dangdut's potential and greatness, they have to get people that actually have quality in their field. But they don't, right? They don't! Dangdut isn't just one thing! Just now I spoke about exercise. Are they thorough or not? Not, right? Especially if we're talking about global quality, the world can tell. I get goosebumps, I'm shocked. Muhammad sought global appraisal, and it turns out he's the slowest in the world [again, she speaks of runner Lalu Muhammad Zohri. This account of his performance on the global stage is an exaggeration]. Do we want the same thing to happen to dangdut? The Indonesian flag is the red and white flag, and when we fly it for songs like *that*, we're trembling, we're afraid of doing wrong. It's like that. Imagine things like that from the government, or that consulates around the world made songs like that available, I don't know. "What is this dangdut?!" *Aduh* [laughs].

Andrea: In that case, what are your hopes for dangdut in the future?

Ika: My hope is that dangdut can raise itself up. What do I mean? Dangdut gives lessons to the people [I. *masyarakat*]. It's not dangdut when it's erotic [I. *seronok*], it's not dangdut anymore, what we have now. Like that. Imagine if that



could come true. I would weep for dangdut to be known all over the world. It's my biggest wish.

Andrea: Maybe it'll happen. [Pause] Is there anything you'd wish to pass on to the people of the U.S., my country, or other western nations about dangdut or Indonesian music?

Ika: Dangdut is one type of Indonesian traditional music. We know, actually, that it has great potential, right? It's only certain people that make it so in the end it's judged to be valueless. But actually, dangdut is capable, and it's huge in its own country.

Andrea: I completely agree. Dangdut is capable.

Ika begins her response with derision for both dangdut and for those who bother with trying to promote it. Then she pivots. Could it happen? Maybe with social media or government support. But then she reconsiders: "But maybe that's just a dream, because this, this, *this* is the music, yeah?" While she considers that government support may be necessary, she also feels fear of public ridicule and shame [I. *malu*] on the international stage. Her comparison to athletics is telling; she is afraid to lose. But then she reveals another element to her trepidation: "The Indonesian flag is the red and white flag, and when we fly it for songs like *that*, we're trembling, we're afraid of doing wrong. It's like that. Imagine things like that from the government, or that consulates around the world made songs like that available, I don't know." Can dangdut music serve as a representative for the nation? Prompted by my question, she reconsiders dangdut's potential. In her language, she reifies dangdut—the true dangdut, the dangdut in which she believes—as something almost personified. Dangdut teaches morality. It is not erotic. It can raise itself up. It has potential. It is capable. In the moment, I understood Ika's meaning to be that dangdut's qualities, its form, instruments, techniques, sound, etc. all *could* go global under the right circumstances. She wants the music that goes global to match the music she loves, as she sees it and desires it to be, because she knows that

“music is one of the ways in which people recognize their relationship to the larger world” (“Exploring the Black Atlantic” 2014). Of course she wants to see herself in her music and take pride in the form it takes globally. She is a radio music director; the stakes are high for Ika and for her listeners. At the time of our interview, I understood her meaning to be that, underneath all the derision heaped upon it was a musical genre capable of bringing pleasure and joy. I agreed with her analysis.

And I still agree that dangdut is capable, even as I question how that capability is measured, who the assumed audience is, and the values involved. As I show in this conclusion, I do not agree with many of the reasons people give, the justifications for holding dangdut back or altering it. The “certain people” Ika mentions—women, *artis* who in her view make dangdut *seronok* and thus make it valueless—I hope that I have presented them in a way that shows their strength, humanity, and creativity. If anyone is capable of taking dangdut global, they are.

“Dangdut is the Music of my Country”: BEKRAF and Intangible Cultural Heritage

Another tactic for promoting dangdut internationally is promoting the music as traditional music. This tactic, which counters those who would present dangdut as Indonesia’s K-pop, is a tactic more familiar to the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and the Creative Economy. In early 2021, the Minister of that body, Sandiaga Uno, announced that the ministry would push for dangdut to be registered with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) as intangible cultural heritage for Indonesia. In contrast to efforts to celebrate dangdut’s pop potential and turn it into another K-Pop, this effort relates to efforts to define dangdut as traditional music

and heritage. The likelihood of success is low; Indonesia currently holds claim to only a few examples of intangible heritage: *wayang* puppetry, *keris* weapons, *batik* printing on cloth, *angklung* bamboo instruments, *saman* dance, *noken* woven bags, and Balinese dance (“Sandi Dorong Musik Dangdut”). The process for determining cultural heritage involves careful proposals and advocacy and takes years. However, Sandiaga is supported in this effort by the Indonesian Directorate General of Multilateral Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is not surprising—as outlined above, the state has long used the arts to define the nation to itself and abroad.

Sandiaga’s proposal to submit dangdut as intangible cultural heritage fits with this view. However, as Michael Raditya argues, such an effort is thorny and caution is needed. Raditya writes, “the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy needs to carefully prepare a plan, so that Indonesia’s cultural heritage is indeed correctly translated for dangdut music and UNESCO’s recognition in the future can really have an impact on the protection and development of dangdut music and its ecosystem, *no exception*” (Raditya 2021). Among the dangers Raditya identifies: that dangdut’s multiple sub-genres (including koplo) will be flattened in the definition; that recognition will place dangdut under the ownership of a single group; and that dangdut practitioners will lose the right to innovate. He rightly concludes, “dangdut cannot be submitted to UNESCO as a sound product, but rather we must articulate dangdut as a culture that grows with its community” (Raditya 2021). I couldn’t agree more with Raditya’s warning, and I want to push it even further: it would be dangerous to declare dangdut as intangible cultural heritage with UNESCO precisely because it is so vibrant, varied,

evolving, and contested. Sandiaga's plan fits with strategies Indonesia has taken in the past to attempt to lay claim to heritage and use it to boost their soft power. This tactic is like an alter ego of globalization—a shadow means to go global while maintaining cultural ownership. UNESCO is not the only way nations have tried to frame intangible cultural ownership and exchange as soft power. My very presence in Indonesia, funded in part by Fulbright and the US Department of State, was an example of what Mark Katz calls “cultural diplomacy, where a state's arts, cuisine, literature, and the like provide the platform for people-to-people interactions” (Katz 2020: 3). As Katz points out, dissonance inevitably arises when a vibrant cultural form is co-opted to serve state interests.

UNESCO differs from other forms of cultural diplomacy because it designates ownership of a cultural practice and declares a mandate for preservation. UNESCO's attempts to categorize and maintain cultural heritage is often framed as attention to care in the face of concerns about loss (Rowlands and Butler 2007). Similarly, designations can revitalize local arts and culture by encouraging national governments to provide additional funding and support, as Bun Rith Suon writes occurred in Cambodia (2009). However, the last two decades of scholarship by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists throw the effectiveness of such efforts into question. Lourdes Arizpe and Cristina Amescua argue, “Heritage is a value-laden concept that can never assume a neutral ground of connotation. Heritage indicates a mode of cultural production with reformative significance” (Arizpe and Amescua 2013:1). Designation, categorization, and preservation are, in their view, a matter of engineering and arbitration, not simply

maintaining the status quo, but instead establishing regulation of and authority over “the multiplicity of meaning in the past” (Arizpe and Amescua 2013:2). Cultural heritage preservation efforts are “about identifying and managing, and defined by selection and ownership” (Arizpe and Amescua 2013:4).

Wiktor Stoczkowski has argued that UNESCO’s ideology of diversity is an experiment in social engineering (2009:7), as has Ulf Hannerz (2007). Brian Graham and coauthors similarly caution, “heritage privileges and empowers an elitist narrative of place” (2000:37). In other words, heritage declarations create support for particular state ideologies, any memory or celebration of culture swept away in political stakes and messaging. Bendix writes, “The symbolic capital inherent in heritage invites social, economic and political contestants to vie for it; heritage becomes another tool or variable in the struggles for power on local and supralocal levels of governance. It is used to add additional contours to a given lifeworld, but also to control other people” (2008:263).

Intangible cultural heritage adds an additional layer of complication, as Arizpe and Amescua argue, by attempting to measure and formalize the social significance of modes of expression (2013). UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage was formalized in a 2003 convention. According to Olivia Cadaval and Cristina Diaz-Carrera, the shift was meant to recognize the significance and agency of cultural practitioners, the phrase “intangible cultural heritage” intended to “[recognize] the knowledge that underscores expressive and material forms” instead of only the forms themselves (2014:424–5). In fact, as Michael Dylan Foster argues, it has created almost the reverse effect: “the infiltration of global, institutional language into local, everyday conversation is one effect

of UNESCO's recognition of tangible and intangible heritage around the world," resulting in both confidence that tradition is recognized and defamiliarization with one's own practices (Foster 2011:64–6), or, to use Diana Taylor's language, extending the "'archive' into the domain of the 'live'" (Taylor 2008:2). In fact, Taylor questions whether preservation of intangible cultural heritage is even possible, since the process attempts to objectify something intangible, creating "a series of spatial and temporal dislocations" (Taylor 2008:3). Even if it were possible, several ethnographic studies argue that the impacts on the intangible heritage and local practitioners are hard to predict. As Foster points out, intangible heritage designations impact a practice's ability to change over time and practitioners' ability to improvise and be flexible. This is despite UNESCO's own language on the subject, which privileges the local (Foster 2015:1). But then, what is the local? As I have shown repeatedly in these chapters, questions around definition and ownership of active cultural practices are up for debate and contestation. More importantly, those who "win" such struggles in the eyes of formal structures like UNESCO are most often those with resources: the established, wealthy, male, those already enfolded into bureaucratic structures, those in the capital rather than those elsewhere (see also Foster 2015:3).

I return again to the women onstage, the women whose bodies are the most visible spectacle and symbol of dangdut koplo. The discourse about them, about finding women with a correct but different image, the right representative for dangdut abroad, recalls for me what Rachmi Diyah Larasati writes about women, dance, and cultural ambassadorship.

Looking at dance technique as a tool to embody different methods of remembering, I propose that the “dancing body” (*tubuh tari*) contains the stories of many dancers’ resilience to the nationalized standard aesthetic form, to different reconstructions, engagements, and contested narratives, and also to the effect of global political discourse on tradition and the aesthetics of multiculturalism. Therefore, I propose looking at the dancing body not merely as artistic embodiment in the sense of memory/technique as the materiality of regulation and artistic endeavor but also as a philosophical strategy of remembering to encounter different kinds of social and political economies of culture. (Larasati 2016)

Larasati herself might be surprised by my application of such ideas to dangdut koplo, but isn’t that the point? Dangdut koplo is not yet nationalized or standardized and has come to fill a ritual role once taken by *lengger*, *tayuban* and other older dance traditions that already experienced the New Order’s cleansing and purification. Larasati speaks from this knowledge when she warns against “the unspoken meanings and assumptions of inclusion and difference, national tradition and alterity—the result of an understanding of official technique as signifying precisely which bodies are appropriate, valid, or safe” (Larasati 2016), and proposes the moving bodies of women as a possible antidote, a collection of alternative movements and meanings. I think of the unruly bodies of dangdut koplo singers who refuse to sit still in the cold Jakarta studios, whose feet itch to return to the road. I think of my own struggles to master what I saw as vocal and movement techniques, when fellow *artis* told me all I needed to do was calm down, relax, and open my mouth more.

### ***Tetap Eksis, Terus Berkarya (To Keep Existing, To Keep Making New Work)***

I have not offered here a comprehensive history of dangdut koplo. All I have offered, to paraphrase Deborah Wong, is “a partial view of a huge phenomenon” (2019:204). Ika would agree that my view is partial; although her disparaging comment

that Jakarta bureaucrats do not understand dangdut implies that she, in fact, does, I heard similar comments again and again from people who claimed that no one else understood the true dangdut, the true singers, the true feeling.<sup>56</sup> I suspect that no one could ever understand every aspect of dangdut's history, practice, and experience. Perhaps Bettina David (2014) is more correct than she imagines when she points out that dangdut's pleasure comes from the very contradictions that make it difficult to make legible. Dangdut koplo is "unsettled, contradictory, pleasurable, frustrating, and slippery" (Wong 2019:205), and therein lies its potency as a sign and as a touchstone for debates about women's bodies and work, eroticism, media, and the *rakyat*.

Dangdut koplo practice continues to change as various stakeholders construct their own meanings. New singers gain prominence, notably Jihan Audy and Happy Asmara, both of whom have leaned into the trends discussed here towards casual dress and the unapologetic use of Javanese language. With their own social media and the increasing power of East Javanese producers and studios,<sup>57</sup> singers are respected and in charge of their own choices.

At the same time, as shown above, debates about dangdut and dangdut koplo at the national and international levels still hang over the music. How can dangdut koplo be properly marketed to represent Indonesia for an international listenership? Who owns dangdut? Is it traditional, or is it a constantly evolving local practice? While these debates

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<sup>56</sup> The most common words used were *betul-betul* (truly or really), *benar-benar* (genuinely) *sebenarnya* (actually or really). Yuli usually used the English word true.

<sup>57</sup> DD Star Records in Kediri, DSA Records in Gresik, Aneka Safari Records and Sandi Record in Banyuwangi, Teta Record in Madiun, and Perdana Record Surabaya are some notable examples of successful local production.



flair, the dangdut koplo circuit flows, singers and musicians innovate, and audiences continue to be moved.

Dangdut koplo's future is still in question. I wrote much of this dissertation during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 (and perhaps longer), and during that time, the dangdut koplo wheels stopped turning. Massive live concerts were forbidden and even television temporarily stopped. Singers and bands went underground, living on whatever money they had saved and whatever they could make from other businesses. Styles changed, and tapings of live events gave way to recordings of small concerts in cafés, singers sitting and casually holding a wired microphone. Nasha Aquila started working for a gossip television show and made YouTube videos highlighting humanitarian issues in her community. Rere got married, had a baby, and continued to perform in whatever small shows she could find. Yuli became a grandmother and kicked her cheating boyfriend out of her home. Lenny released a series of religious song covers. Gita started a podcast. When dangdut koplo was unavailable to them as a main source of income, they turned to other innovative work, each in their own way striving to *tetap eksis*, to keep going.

I wish I had a response for BEKRAF officials seeking to promote the true dangdut koplo.<sup>58</sup> The only answer I have is frustrating and incomplete. Dangdut koplo is already a

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<sup>58</sup> I indulge myself here in a thought experiment, the type the BEKRAF officials surely expected from me. What has prevented dangdut from going global? Why has dangdut koplo had more success? First, the very factors that dangdut television tries to emphasize—melancholy and vocal virtuosity—may hamper dangdut's ability to spread abroad. Dangdut singing, with its elaborate *cengkok*, is not accessible to foreigners, even ones trained musically in other genres. In songs like “Payung Hitam,” the *cengkok* are so dense that it's impossible to identify a melody separate from melisma. In contrast, dangdut koplo practice emphasizes speech-like, syllabic singing; while *cengkok* punctuate the melody, they happen rarely, only

vibrant practice, not without internal issues of ownership, credit, and stigma, but nonetheless thriving with or without the approval of Jakarta elites. For me, dangdut koplo is on the sweltering stage in the middle of a field in Pati or a kampung neighborhood in Kediri, singers gingerly fixing their appearance and studying lyrics while the band settles into a rhythmic din. It's in the young women excitedly watching music videos and making cover songs with their smartphones. It's on the exhausting road. It's in the resonance my body feels in response to the push of the koplo kendang, the confidence of the singers, and the intoxication of the audience. It's in the longing that women listeners feel in response to lyrics and mournful voices. In short, dangdut koplo's power is in desire.

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once or twice per phrase. The formal staging and emphasis on the melancholy in dangdut television also obscures one of dangdut's most pleasurable aspects: simple, improvisational dancing in the audience. Dangdut koplo, on the other hand, further emphasizes the pleasure of dance in the audience with a faster drumbeat, improvised *senggakan*, and a continued focus on live shows. In the case of "Sayang," the easily-singable melody, infectious rhythm, innovative rap, and Via Vallen's rich vocal quality were the main factors behind its success, not Via Vallen's fashion choices.

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## Appendices

### A Note on Translation and Spelling

All translations in this work are my own unless otherwise noted. Names of places and historical figures follow the current Indonesian system of spelling (e.g. Suharto, Surabaya rather than Soeharto, Soerabaia) except when in direct quotes. For dangdut singers, who often use pseudonyms and may use multiple spellings of their own names interchangeably, I have used my best judgement to select a spelling and attempted to be consistent throughout. I have included variations of name spellings in the Appendix under Names and Bio Sketches.

### Glossary

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b><i>abangan</i></b>	As outlined by Clifford Geertz (1976:5), <i>abangan</i> is a term for Javanese Muslims who practice a more syncretic version of Islam than the orthodox <i>santri</i> . Their belief system incorporates animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Most Javanese dangdut singers fit in this category.
<b><i>alun-alun</i></b>	A large, open, central square, today commonly referring to open areas outside the <i>kraton</i> , or palaces.
<b><i>artis</i></b>	A common term for dangdut singers. Unlike the English-language term ‘artist’, <i>artis</i> does not imply artistry, but it does imply celebrity and charisma.
<b><i>banci</i></b>	Trans women or men deemed effeminate. Sometimes also used to refer to gay men. <i>Bencong</i> is a related term.
<b><i>baper</i></b>	A slang [I. <i>bahasa gaul</i> ] <i>singkatan</i> , or abbreviation, from <i>bawa perasaan</i> , which loosely means to be carried off in emotion or overcome by emotion, or, alternatively, to bring too much emotion to a situation.
<b><i>bintang tamu</i></b>	<i>Bintang</i> , star, <i>tamu</i> , guest. In dangdut koplo, <i>bintang tamu</i> are singers who are directly requested by patrons, and who thus occupy a higher rung of prestige. Unlike other singers booked by the band, <i>bintang tamu</i> can <i>ngropel</i> , stay only for their set and then leave for another

	show.
<b><i>bule</i></b>	An Indonesian term for foreigners, especially those of European descent.
<b><i>cabe-cabe</i></b>	A <i>cabe</i> is a small bird's-eye chili. Cabe-cabe implies a woman who is sexually available. Some claim it is an acronym for <i>Cewek</i> (woman) <i>Alay</i> (a <i>singkatan</i> of <i>anak lebay</i> , or cheesy or tacky young person) <i>Bisa Entot</i> (fuckable), but dangdut songs often feature food metaphors for sexuality.
<b><i>cengeng</i></b>	Weepy, overwrought, or melancholic. Often used to refer to sad dangdut songs.
<b><i>cengkok</i></b>	Melismas. In dangdut, the melismatic patterns are derived from three traditions: Bollywood, <i>karawitan</i> , and Islamic recitation.
<b><i>cowok banget</i></b>	<i>Cowok</i> , man, <i>banget</i> , very or extremely. I translate the phrase as super masculine.
<b><i>daya tarik</i></b>	<i>Daya</i> , power, <i>tarik</i> , pull. <i>Daya tarik</i> is the power of attraction. Dangdut singers and MCs are often considered to have a nearly supernatural power to attract others and make them listen. Also sometimes referred to as <i>daya tarik massa</i> , the power to pull in the masses.
<b><i>dhalang</i></b>	Puppeteer for <i>wayang</i> performance.
<b><i>gemulai</i></b>	Swaying or supple. Often used to refer to effeminateness in men or as a euphemism for homosexuality.
<b><i>goyang damai</i></b>	Literally peaceful dancing. A movement in dangdut koplo live, outdoor events meant to protect audience members from getting carried away in emotion or starting fistfights. People form teams ahead of the concert and designate a squad leader, who improvises choreography that the rest follow. The maintain space about six feet apart from each other to avoid any unintentional bumping. Women are more likely to dance when <i>goyang damai</i> is happening. Also called <i>pasukan</i> , or squad.
<b><i>hiburan</i></b>	Entertainment
<b><i>ikhlas</i></b>	From Arabic, sincerity or single-mindedness. The name given to the 112 <sup>th</sup> sura of the Qur'an. In Indonesia <i>ikhlas</i> usually means genuine disinterest in the worldly possessions and pleasures, a willingness to let go of something if fate, God, or other people will it.
<b><i>jalur pantura</i></b>	Also called Jalan Pantura, and overlaps in many areas with Highway 1. Pantura is a <i>singkatan</i> of <i>pantai</i> (beach) and <i>utara</i> (north). The area is known for raucous dangdut koplo in the east and other regional genres in the west.
<b><i>jiwa/ menjiwai</i></b>	Soul. When used in reference to singing dangdut, to sing with soul or <i>menjiwai</i> a song means to internalize its meaning, get into character, and animate the emotions of the song.
<b><i>joget</i></b>	Distinct from joget dance in Malaysia and Singapore, <i>joget</i> in Indonesia refers to improvised, informal dance moves in a group setting.

<b>kampungan</b>	Of the village or the slums. Kampung, often translated as village, can also be an urban place, but connotes informality and lack of development. Dangdut is often referred to as <i>kampungan</i> .
<b>karawitan</b>	Javanese court traditional music (Javanese gamelan).
<b>kelas menengah ke bawah</b>	<i>Kelas</i> , class, <i>menengah ke bawah</i> , the middle to lower. This is a common way to refer to lower social classes in Indonesia, and is often applied when referring to dangdut's audience.
<b>lagu wajib nasional</b>	<i>Lagu</i> , song, <i>wajib</i> , mandatory. A semi-formal collection of patriotic songs, a combination of nationalist songs and regional traditional hits.
<b>langgam Jawa</b>	A regional music genre that combines keroncong with Javanese <i>karawitan</i> .
<b>mabuk</b>	Drunk or intoxicated, usually (but not always) with alcohol.
<b>macet</b>	Traffic jam or congestion.
<b>mendunia</b>	To go worldwide.
<b>musisi</b>	Musicians.
<b>ngropel</b>	To double up. In dangdut koplo, the practice of singers scheduling several concerts in a single night. She arrives, sings her set, and then immediately leaves for the next show.
<b>organ tunggal</b>	<i>Organ</i> refers to a portable electronic keyboard, while <i>tunggal</i> is the word for single. Organ tunggal is a low-budget option for musical entertainment at parties, usually featuring a keyboard player and one or two singers, though sometimes a percussionist or guitarist will join the ensemble.
<b>orkes Melayu (OM)</b>	Melayu orchestras. Melayu songs are distinct from Malaysian songs. Lagu Melayu, or traditional Melayu songs, generally considered a shared heritage of the nations now called Malaysia and Indonesia, were a song form based on the pantun, a four-line poetic form, in which professional women singers called ronggeng traded verses with men dancers, musicians, or audience members. The term Orkes Melayu emerged in the late 1930s to refer to groups that played Melayu songs harmonized by European instruments like piano, violin, and bass, as well as <i>gendang</i> . While dangdut bands and music have little direct resemblance to these 1930s groups, to this day, dangdut koplo bands in East Java maintain the prefix O.M. before their band name.
<b>orkes Gambus</b>	Small ensembles featuring Arab-derived instruments, including the gambus lute.
<b>qasidah</b>	Also spelled kasidah, in Indonesia this term refers to Islamic music broadly.
<b>pasukan</b>	See <i>goyang damai</i>
<b>pengamen</b>	Busker, someone who plays music on the street for money.
<b>rakyat</b>	The people, usually used to distinguish those without power, education, or resources. Dangdut is often called the music of the rakyat.
<b>reog</b>	Traditional Indonesian dance from Ponorogo in East Java featuring a

	dancer in a lion mask, other masked dancers, and horse trance dance.
<b><i>ronggeng</i></b>	An ancient Javanese dance practice in which female dancers perform for mainly male audiences.
<b><i>saweran</i></b>	Ritual tip giving. In dangdut koplo, audience members hand bills directly to singers.
<b><i>senggakan</i></b>	Singing or chanting nonsense syllables. In <i>karawitan</i> , <i>senggakan</i> happens between phrases of the melody. In dangdut koplo, <i>senggakan</i> is usually short shouts like “Ah eh oh eh.”
<b><i>seronok</i></b>	Erotic or sexy, especially tied to clothing or dance. Negative connotations.
<b><i>singkatan</i></b>	Abbreviation. Unlike abbreviations or acronyms in English, <i>singkatan</i> rarely use only the first letter of each word. More often, they take the first few letters (and sometimes the last letters) of each word to create a new word that easily rolls off the tongue.
<b><i>state ibuism</i></b>	During the Suharto era, the state ideology that reinforced women’s primary role as child-bearing and supporting their children and husband. Nationalist discourse and state policy saw Suharto as the patriarch of the state, and women were mobilized as wives of workers and civil servants, not as workers in their own right.
<b><i>tanggung jawab moral</i></b>	<i>Tanggung jawab</i> , responsibility, <i>moral</i> from the English word ‘moral.’ Many dangdut producers express a moral responsibility for their audience, a belief tied to the idea that dangdut’s audience is in need of guidance or easily manipulated.
<b><i>tayuban</i></b>	Traditional East Javanese dance in which professional female dancers dance directly with the male audience.
<b><i>tuan rumah</i></b>	<i>Tuan</i> , master, <i>rumah</i> , house. In reference to dangdut, the <i>tuan rumah</i> is the person who puts on or organizes the event.
<b><i>warung</i></b>	Small stalls on the side of the road that serve food and drink.
<b><i>warkop</i></b>	A <i>singkatan</i> of <i>warung kopi</i> , or coffee stall. Producers and DJs used the term <i>kelas warkop</i> to refer to dangdut’s audience of poor men who spend time sitting in coffee stalls instead of working.
<b><i>wayang</i></b>	A form of puppet theatre from Java and Bali, often depicting stories from Hindu epics.

## **A Note about Names and Structure**

Most Indonesians go by a single name in everyday life, and I have followed standard practice by referring to them by that name rather than by their last name. As a result, this list is organized alphabetically by first name rather than last name. Dangdut koplo singers as a rule have two names in their stage name, but those two names are not necessarily equal to a first and last name. Referring to them by the second name alone is unheard of. Their full name is included here with spelling variations, alphabetized by first name.

## **Names and Short Biographies**

**Alice Arkadewi:** Singer and daughter of band manager Yuli. Alice Arkadewi performs most often with her mother's band, OM Arkadewi Musik, and is frequently a guest star on the East Javanese TV show Stasiun Dangdut. She lives in Trawas, East Java, and was eighteen years old in 2018.

**Arif:** A dangdut singer from West Sumatra who competed in the first season of Liga Dangdut Indonesia and placed third. Because he is blind and was raised by a single mother, MCs and producers on the show crafted many empathy plays around Arif's home and personal life.

**Candra Jamil:** Candra works as an MC for the television show Stasiun Dangdut. An accomplished singer, he often performs duets or special numbers with guest stars or with Lenny, his fellow MC. He also works as an MC for weddings and club events. He was a young adult in 2018. Name sometimes spelled Chandra.

**Cindy Marenta:** A dangdut singer and regional guest star in East and Central Java. Very close to Epep New Kendedes.

**Epep New Kendedes:** The kendang player for orkes Melayu New Kendedes. Epep, who also goes by Evi, was a young adult in 2018.

**Fitri Carlina:** A singer from Banyuwangi. Since her hit song “AGB Tua” in 2012, she has lived in Jakarta and worked for Wonderful Indonesia in addition to creating new hit songs and sometimes serving as a jury member for singing competition television on Indosiar.

**Gatot:** A manager for OM Monata, and Mintul’s husband.

**Gita:** Producer for *Stasiun Dangdut*, JTV. Gita was a young adult in 2018.

**Ika:** Music Director and DJ for the youth segment at Radio Wijaya, an all-dangdut radio station in Surabaya. Ika studied literature at UNAIR and started working in dangdut radio because of an internship.

**Inul Daratista:** A superstar dangdut koplo singer from Pasuruan, East Java, thirty-nine years old in 2018. In 2003, her *ngebor* dance became a subject of national controversy.

**Lenny:** Lenny is an MC for the East Javanese television show *Stasiun Dangdut*. Also a singer, she releases covers of rock, pop, Islami, and qasidah. In 2018, she was in her late thirties or early forties. Sometimes spells her name Leny or Lenni.

**Lesti:** A superstar of Indosiar’s dangdut singing competition television, Lesti won the first season of D’Academy (Dangdut Academy) on Indosiar at only fifteen years old. She is now a regular on Indosiar as a jury member, has starred in several television mini-series on the channel, and has won the top awards in dangdut singing for her singles

“Egois” and “Tirani.” Sometimes spells her name Lesty or Lestiani. Also known as Lesti DA (Dangdut Academy, a reference to the show responsible for her first rise to fame) or Lesty Kejora (“Kejora” was the title of her first single).

**Mintul:** Also known as Bunda Monata, manager of OM Monata and Gatot’s wife.

**Mutik Nida:** Singer and kendang player from Semarang, Central Java. Mutik Nida learned to play kendang by playing in a qasidah group.

**Nasha Aquila:** A singer from Solo, Central Java, Nasha Aquila moved to Surabaya and began to pursue a dangdut career. She is a regional guest star with many well-known dangdut koplo groups in East and Central Java. She is also an avid YouTuber and runs channels dedicated to humanitarianism and food as well as dangdut. She is married to kendang player Paijo and has two children. Sometimes spells her name Nasha Aqila or Nasya Aqila. In 2018, she was thirty-one years old.

**Nella Kharisma:** A singer from Kediri, East Java. In 2018, she was in her early twenties and had several hit singles.

**Niken Aprilia:** A singer from Surabaya of regional fame. She also designs clothing. In 2018, she was in her late twenties or early thirties.

**OM Monata:** orkes Melayu Monata, founded in the mid-1990s, is a dangdut koplo band whose range spans East and Central Java. Managed by Gatot and Mintul, OM Monata is known for being a rock-influenced koplo group. In 2018 the band split into two: OM Monata, managed by Gatot and Mintul, and OM New Monata, headed by Sodik.

**OM New Kendedes:** orkes Melayu New Kendedes, an all-women dangdut koplo band from Kediri.



**OM Pallapa:** orkes Melayu Pallapa. Sometimes spelled Palapa. Once managed by a husband and wife team, OM New Pallapa split from OM Palapa several years before my fieldwork. Paijo, Nasha Aquila's husband, is the drummer for OM Pallapa. The drummer for OM New Pallapa is Ki Ageng Slamet, widely considered the best koplo drummer currently working.

**Paijo:** Kendang player for OM Pallapa and husband of singer Nasha Aquila.

**Rara:** Second-place winner of the first season of Liga Dangdut, Rara (birth name Tiara Ramadhani) of South Sumatra, Rara has continued to have a career in dangdut singing, acting, and MCing, and most recently has formed the K-pop-inspired group Byoode. In 2018, she was sixteen years old.

**Ratna Antika:** A singer from Malang, East Java, Ratna Antika is among the most sought-after singers for live events in dangdut koplo because of her clear voice and powerful stage presence. She was in her late twenties in 2018.

**Rere Amora:** A singer from Surabaya who became famous singing with OM Monata. In her early twenties in 2018.

**Rhoma Irama:** Also known as Raden Haji Oma Irama, Rhoma Irama is widely known as the King of Dangdut and a film star. In his seventies in 2018, Rhoma Irama has become a figure promoting conservatism in religion, music, and politics.

**Sodiq:** Once the main guitarist for OM Monata, Sodiq became famous as a vocalist by performing the mic checks at shows. Now a star in his own right, Sodiq has split from OM Monata to create OM New Monata.

**Via Vallen:** The stage name of Maulidia Octavia. Via Vallen's 2017 hit song "Sayang" catapulted her into national (and international) fame. She is from Surabaya and rose to fame with OM Sera. In 2018, she was in her late twenties.

**Yuli:** An East Javanese singer, band manager, and business owner. After making money from singing, she studied business and hospitality and started several businesses, including OM Arkadewi Musik, a dangdut koplo band. She also manages her daughter Alice's career. She is also known as Bunda Pelangi. In 2018, she was in her late thirties or early forties.