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Experimentalism and American Gamelan: Gamelan Son of Lion and the Internationalization of Indonesian Arts

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The word gamelan refers both to a kind of music ensemble indigenous to the Indonesian archipelago as well as the music played on those instruments. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, gamelan instruments began to spread around the world at an unprecedented rate. This expansion produced new localized scenes of gamelan practices particular to specific locations, including Australia, Germany, Japan, the UK, and most prolifically in the United States. The mechanisms and processes by which gamelan has globalized are varied and complex. Moreover they have relied on various local discursive, academic, and creative traditions to allow lasting gamelan communities to take root and thrive outside of Indonesia. My research follows the gamelan of New York based composers' collective Gamelan Son of Lion to investigate some of these mechanisms and processes. This group has operated in New York's experimental

** This research stems from my forthcoming dissertation "Gamelan as World Citizen: American Experimentalism and the Internationalization of Gamelan."

"Downtown" arts scene since the mid-1970s, incorporating local musical movements such as minimalism and Fluxus into their gamelan compositions.

One of the ways I approach this topic is by focusing on gamelan instruments themselves, asking what kinds of stories these inanimate objects might tell us and how they function within the diverse musical communities that form around them. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai asserts that things, like people, have social lives. He notes that scholarly approaches to studying things are generally "conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human[s] . . . endow them with, [but that] this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we must follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories."¹ The global circulation of gamelan instruments offers an intriguing opportunity to explore Appadurai's proposition, as gamelan instruments have played a critical role in this particular inter-cultural exchange. As composer-ethnomusicologist Barbara Benary and others have observed, "Indonesian arts in the United States developed neither from a sizeable immigrant community nor from the influence of popular media, but rather by way of scholars, composers, and the academic institutions which were willing to shelter and fund their cross-cultural

¹ Arjun Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 5.

investigations."² I argue that in addition to these institutional support systems, gamelan instruments themselves played a significant role in the proliferation of Indonesian arts in the United States, functioning as actors that brought gamelan music making beyond the academy and created new gamelan traditions around the world. By tracing the trajectories of a specific gamelan and the discourses surrounding it we can begin to better understand the ways in which cultures and ideas travel and localize in a globalizing world.

For a clear example of what physical instruments can tell us about their trajectories and meanings, let's take a look at two gamelan instruments that American composers constructed based on Indonesian models.³ Usually gamelan groups around the world make use of imported instruments that were built in Java or Bali. In the United States, however, a remarkable number of composers took it upon themselves to build their own gamelan instruments. These builders did not study gamelan making with Indonesian gong smiths, but came up with creative methods indicative of a DIY ethos to create functioning musical instruments out of readily available materials. The instrument on the left was built by Lou Harrison and William Colvig in Aptos, California in 1971, while the one on the right was built by

² Barbara Benary, "Editorial: Hello Gamelan" in *Ear Magazine for New Music* 8, No. 4 *Gamelan: Indonesian Arts in America* Ed. Barbara Benary (Sept./Oct./Nov., 1983): 3.

³ The live presentation version featured images of the two instruments described here in text as well as an instrument borrowed from the UC Santa Cruz Javanese gamelan.

Barbara Benary in New York just a few years later. Simply by looking at these instruments and comparing them to the Javanese built equivalent in front of me, several differences become apparent. Harrison's instrument has more keys, some which are offset, and the keys are made from aluminum pipes rather than solid bronze slabs. The instrument also stands on legs, so the player would play it while standing up. Benary's instrument looks a great deal more like the Javanese *saron* I brought with me, containing the same number of keys cut from sheets of hot rolled steel, and the instrument sits on the floor, as would the player performing on it. The rationales for these differences lie in the motivations for their construction. Harrison did not intend to build a Javanese style gamelan, but rather drew inspiration from the gamelan to create an ensemble of tuned percussion instruments for his own compositional practice. Benary, an ethnomusicologist, built her instruments in order to teach Javanese music to American students at Rutgers University around the same time Universities across the country, including UCSC, were developing similar gamelan programs. Both Harrison and Benary's instruments are homemade. Both were used to compose new music for gamelan and make use of unusual materials, but Benary's instruments were built in response to contemporaneous ethnomusicological pedagogies, and their design reflects that purpose.

Benary's instruments also hold a deeper connection to Java beyond their physical appearance. Harrison, like many other American gamelan builders, tuned his instruments in accordance to certain experimental tuning practices that draw on European discourses, as evidenced by the offset keys on this metallophone that show a deliberate similarity to a piano keyboard. Benary, on the other hand, chose a Javanese tuning for her instruments, one that further entangles them a different set of discourses. Benary chose the tuning found in the instruments of Gamelan *Khyai Mendung*, the very first set of Javanese instruments imported to the United States for ethnomusicological study at UCLA. These instruments were built in the Javanese court city of Surakarta and tuned in accordance to Javanese convention, which has to do with the specific tastes and feelings (*rāsā* and *embat*) of the individual builder. This tuning, considered to be the intangible quality of gamelan instruments, traveled from Java to UCLA by way of the instruments of Khyai Mendung, and then to Benary's instruments via a recording released by the UCLA Institute of Ethnomusicology in 1967. The tuning of Gamelan Son of Lion, however, is importantly different from that of Khyai Mendung.

In Java, gamelan instruments are not considered complete until after a period of time during which the newly forged bronze settles. During this period, the gamelan is played everyday, defective keys and

gongs are replaced, and the tuning gradually changes from where the builder initially set it, becoming something unique to that gamelan. The instruments of Gamelan Son of Lion went through a similar process. Over several years of gigging around New York City's downtown scene, the tuning gradually became higher in pitch, though not uniformly so. Benary recalled to me that she had three different saron in three different tunings. Rather than go back to her original tuning measurements, Benary picked the saron with the tuning she liked the best and adjusted the rest of the instruments to match that one. Though strikingly similar to the process of tuning a gamelan in Java, Benary's method also calls to mind contemporaneous discourses of experimental music in New York.

Whereas composers like Lou Harrison engaged in experimental tuning practices to a great extent, choosing their notes very precisely, the composer John Cage claimed that "tuning is another form of government" and encouraged composers to simply listen and allow sounds to be themselves, and not to subject them to the whims of human desires.⁴ This open-minded approach to listening coupled with Gamelan Son of Lion's connections to Javanese practices, among other things, illuminate these instruments as a unique phenomenon—one not wholly American and not wholly Javanese, but neither is it a hybrid of the two. As anthropologist James Clifford notes, words such

⁴ See John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

as hybridity or syncretism are often inadequate for discussing cultural practices that are in motion as is Gamelan's internationalization.

Clifford writes: "Contact approaches [to anthropology] presuppose not sociocultural wholes subsequently brought into relationship, but rather systems already constituted relationally, entering new relations through historical processes of displacement."⁵ As gamelan instruments travel around the globe, finding new communities in which to dwell, close attention to their trajectories and the entangled discourses surrounding them can help elucidate some of the larger political, economic, and historical processes that gave rise to this peculiar situation that is now being called "global gamelan."

⁵ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997): 7