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Global Pop / Vigilante: Reflexivity,  
Value, and the Production of Reality in  
Indonesia

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**GLOBAL POP / VIGILANTE**  
REFLEXIVITY, VALUE,  
and THE PRODUCTION OF REALITY in INDONESIA

Aaron M. Shapiro

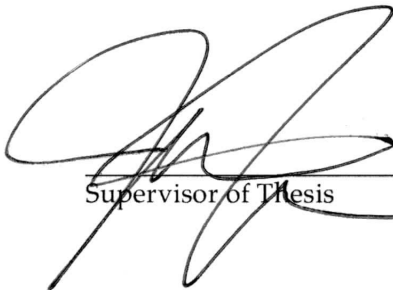
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Supervisor of Thesis



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## Part I

### *exposing reflexivity*

In his essay, "Exposing Yourself: Reflexivity, Anthropology, and Film," Jay Ruby (2000) considers the relationship between anthropological knowledge production and the cultural/aesthetic trope of "being reflexive." How exactly do anthropologists who are interested in "situating" the practices of knowledge production (Haraway 1991) make available the theoretical and methodological means by which he or she has collected and presented data? What does it *look like* when we seek to expose our "subjectivity" as a means of obtaining a more "objective" account? Ultimately, Ruby argues, the traditional channel for 'exposing ourselves'—writing<sup>1</sup>—might be inadequate for this initiative. In its place, he suggests, film offers fertile ground for critical self-exposition. Since *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Vertov's (1929) expose on the cinematic apparatus and its place in Soviet society, there has been a filmic tradition devoted to demystifying the mechanical means of its own existence through self-exposition and reflexivity. Films about filmmakers (like novels about authors, images of cameras and photographers, songs about writing songs, etc. (see Ruby & Myerhoff 1982)) have, for Ruby, a more clear and concise purchase on authenticity and Reality. Like reflexive cinema—or better, *through* reflexive cinema—anthropologists could attempt to make explicit what "doing ethnography" looks like and how it has the authority to know the world.

Unwittingly, Ruby's critique engages in what Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (2004: 2) refer to as "the discourse of the Real." (I use 'the Real' and 'Reality' with a capital-R to refer to the conventions of authenticity in representation, whereas lower-case-r 'reality' is meant to point to the social world *prior to* the intervention of the mediating form at hand.) The discourse of the Real is in constant circulation as folk

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<sup>1</sup> Many 'reflexive' accounts of anthropological fieldwork have appeared since the 1970s: cf. Cerwonka & Malkki 2007, Rabinow 1977; Worth & Adair 1972; see Ruby 2000 for greater detail.

knowledge about what is real and what is not. It is the shared, conventional, and thus cultural criteria by which people construe reality. And, to speak of the discourse of the Real is to speak of differentiated social domains of reality construal: different people will have different criteria for what can be considered real and what cannot. But this is not to say that this knowledge is naïve. Representations that lay claim to reality or realism are not, as some early cultural studies models held, like a hypodermic needle, injecting opinions or propaganda into audiences. Rather, audiences share a sophisticated and reflexive wisdom about Reality. People are aware of how Reality is represented to them through various media. This informs and instructs a common understanding of what can and what cannot be considered real; which forms of mediation produce more or less realistic products; and how these forms of mediation and their products claim to know the world.

For Ruby, televisual representations are epistemologically closer to the real, inherently less mediated than their textual counterparts. Reflexivity in televisual production, then, removes a second layer of mediation: the filmmaker yields authority and power in his claims to authenticity; the viewer is left with ample evidence to decide for him- or herself what is Real and what is not. 'Exposing yourself' further subtracts from mediation, thereby yielding the authority of production to the interpretive power of interpretation. Knowledge of the world—be it anthropological or popular—appears to be democratized. Reflexivity is Ruby's elaborate and theoretical construal of what can and what cannot be considered "real" in social scientific endeavors—his own criteria for Reality, a discourse of the Real.

On the basis that reality is only knowable through its representations as "the Real"—that reality was always already Reality—I contend in this essay that the trope of reflexivity, in all of its iterations, neither yields production power nor democratizes knowledge production. Rather, reflexivity is one trope in a repertoire of performing

authenticity, sincerity, and reality, found not only in social-scientific endeavors but also in media and representational practices broadly (Ruby & Myerhoff 1982). Unlike Ruby's critique, my goal here is not to utilize this trope as a way to formulate a more authentic ethnographic account, but to investigate reflexivity itself as a trope of authenticity, one that shapes and is shaped by the social world. How do people *do* reflexivity? If reflexivity is construed, as it is by Ruby, as somehow subtracting from mediation, decisions about what to include and what not to include in a mediated product are themselves cultural practices subject to inquiry. What are the considerations that go into these decisions, into constructing Reality? Who are making these decisions? And to what end?

### *making television Real*

Since the year 2000, when Ruby re-published "Exposing Yourself," there has been a quiet but unyielding regime change in the realm of television. Reality TV, once novel and modish, has become accepted as one, if not *the*, standard genre of entertainment in the new century. From its foundations in "candid television" in the early 1960s, through its adolescent years in the 1990s (think *Cops* and *The Real World*), the production of Reality TV has become perfected as the default genre for all major television networks. And its domain is rambling: Cooking shows, make-over shows, *Big-Brother* style surveillance shows, drug rehabilitation shows, dating shows, talent searches, survivor shows, cop shows, etc. (Ouellette & Hay 2008; Murray & Ouellette 2004; Palmer 2003). But while its themes may sprawl, the genre, Murray & Ouellette (2004: 2) maintain, is united by the specificity of its aesthetic claims to the Real—what I assert to be a translation and amplification of Ruby's trope of reflexivity.

Reflexivity in Reality TV is meant to subvert the typical conventions of the genre's predecessor, the documentary. The aesthetic devices typical of documentary—

its own conventions of performing Reality—have become well known and widely registered as conventions of representing Reality. In the classic documentary mode, the means of production were not made explicit, leaving opaque or making irrelevant the documentary production process. This also had the effect of reifying a backstage/forestage dichotomy. In contemporary Reality production, however, reflexivity and transparency of production are seen to produce a *less* mediated and more participant-driven presentation of Reality. Two mechanisms or conventions of reflexivity appear commonly. First, cameras and cameramen are often included in the diegetic Reality so as to expose the ‘show-ness’ of the show. In *The Real World*, for instance, the most frantic and dramatically charged moments often involve a rushed and confused scrambling such that the technological and social means of production (the cameras and camera crew) are visible to the viewer. This has the dual effect of confirming the unscripted Reality of the moment and exposing the proximity of the production process to the participants and their lives.

The second mechanism of reflexivity is ‘the confessional,’ or video diary. Participants are able to withdraw themselves from the group to catch a moment of ‘reflection’ and address the camera in private, recounting the most dramatic events from the day or week. This reflexivity on the part of the participants highlights their ordinary, everyday-ness—and their sincerity. Producing confessionals that the audience can read as ‘sincere’ performs an emotive authenticity that valorizes a connection between viewer and viewed, participants and audience. There is no longer an illusive narrator that construes for the audience what, exactly, they are seeing. Rather, the show’s everyday participants speak of their feelings through first-hand accounts of key events. This often resembles a testimony to the images presented. More than an account of the events transpired, participants testify to an empirical and emotional *being there*:



not only did a given event happen, but its social-dramatic consequences were Real.<sup>2</sup> The testimonial or confessional transforms the televisual mode of address from the timeworn didacticism of documentary narration into a more individualized ‘conversation’ with the viewer (Ouellette & Hay 2008; Peters 2006), thereby relaying a sense of intimacy, immediacy, and connection.

### *Real Culture*

In addition to its reflexive aesthetic, Reality TV is often, as Fish (2007) notes, a surprising analogue to ethnography, as both a realist genre and means of simulating experience in the social world. Indeed, both anthropology and Reality television are “culture industries” that rely on the (re)production of difference across socio-cultural boundaries (2007: 6). That is, in the vein of traditional anthropology, which was premised on the self-evidence of difference (rather than similitude) across perceived social or cultural boundaries, Reality TV presumes the ontology of these divisions. Further, through the experientially driven intervention of both ethnography and Reality TV, such difference is demonstrated to be surmountable.

Consider the following “social experiment” shows. In *The Simple Life*, Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie—two of Hollywood’s new royalty—are flung into the depths of American pastoral, where they must live with rural (and apparently less cosmopolitan) families. Through these experiences, the princesses are forced to learn, experientially, what ‘Real life’ is like, and to become aware of the very extraordinariness of their own lives. On spouse-swapping shows, like *Trading Spouses* or *Wife Swap*, couples swap spouses across lines of racial or socioeconomic difference. Contestants participate in a domestic world that is, by design, culturally different from their own and are thus compelled to face an alienating difference. On these and other social

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<sup>2</sup> See Turner 1982 for a description of “social drama.”

experiment shows, participants are made to cross-cultural boundaries, undergo an experientially driven transformation, and then reflect upon their experiences and what they have learned (Fish 2007). The struggle and challenge of crossing such seemingly insurmountable social barriers is utilized as Reality's dramatic motivation.

Of course, both Ruby and I would object to the notion that, in their ethnographic-esque premises, these shows have "done ethnography." However, insofar as Reality TV and its producers have adopted an ethnographically-inspired 'cultural' sensibility (that is, through the (re)production of social difference and similitude as stock content for programming), conducting ethnographic research on the relationship between reflexivity, realism, and the production of Reality is particularly salient given that Reality shows are apt to mobilize concepts like 'culture', 'difference', and 'society' with brevity and ease. The reflexivity that is now the trademark of Reality TV's aesthetics (exposing the technological means of representation; testimonial or confessional empiricism and sincerity; participant-driven narration) works to objectify these concepts. 'Culture' can be transformed into a thing-like entity. No longer found exclusively in academic texts, 'culture'-*qua*-commodity has made its way into the public sphere, to be conjured and reified by media producers within a regime of reflexively constituted Reality. And, in an increasingly globalized and media-saturated world, the power to manipulate and determine 'culture' is exactly that which is at stake (see *Box 1* below). By considering the aesthetics necessary for this type of transformation, I ask: What are the representational conditions necessary to reify 'culture' as a thing, as Reality, as existing prior to mediation?

***Box 1: Culture at Stake***

Consider the following quote from Turner's work with Kayapo activists (2002):

*Right! All over the world people are looking at these videos we are making of ourselves. So I am glad to have come today to this place where videos are made. This had not yet appeared when I was a youth. Now that we are becoming more like the whites, however, we are going to need to watch these videos we are making of ourselves.*

*It is not whites who are doing this work, but I, a Kayapo, who am doing it, as all of you can see.*

*These videos will be seen in all countries. Tell your children and grandchildren, don't be deaf to my words, this [work] is to support our future generations, all our people. This is what I want to say to you today.*

*I am a Kayapo doing this work. All of you in all countries who see the pictures I make can thereby come to know our culture, my culture of which I tell you today.*

[Mokuka, kayapo leader and videomaker, explaining the significance of his work in a video he made at the Centro de Trabalho Indigenista, São Paulo, August 1991 (translated from Kayapo by Terence Turner); Turner 2002: 75].

In the 1980s and early '90s, academics were faced with the introduction of 'globalization' in popular discourse. 'What exactly is globalization?' they wondered. 'Is it new? What does it mean for culture?' The dominant theoretical stance that emerged from this period has become known as the "cultural imperialism" hypothesis (for a detailed account of the theory's parameters, see Tomlinson 1991). The cultural imperialism model holds that globalization means the demolition of native cultures and subaltern voices (as if they hadn't been violently attacked before globalization). Problematic on a number of levels, including an unquestioning acceptance of globalization's ontology, this theoretical stance was soon disregarded as too blunt a theoretical instrument to get at the nuances of globalization's uptake.

Yet, as soon as academics rid themselves of the cultural imperialism model, it started to gain currency in public discourse. Cultural and indigenous activist projects, like Mokuka's, were enrolled as evidence *for* a cultural imperialist argument, since the use of media technology was understood to be a decidedly inauthentic cultural practice for native groups like the Kayapo. In other words, media practices meant to *preserve* culture were seen to be destructive of those 'cultures'. However, as Turner points out, these projects have been used "to strengthen their sense of cultural identity and the continuity of cultural traditions" (2002: 80) and have been, as Ginsburg notes, both "assertive and conservative of identity" (cited in Turner 2002: 76). In cases where the concept of culture needs to be operationalized for legal assertions, media often plays a dynamic role and must be considered as a cultural practice in and of itself.

The tension here between the popular conception of cultural "authenticity" in the wake of globalization on the one hand, and Indigenous struggles to record and assert their cultural rights on the other, locates culture as a prime object of contemporary struggles. 'Culture' itself becomes a cultural object, and the right to determine its definition is exactly that which is at stake.

To reiterate, mine is a departure from Ruby's critique. My interest in Reality TV's reflexive aesthetic apparatus is not as a source of inspiration for ethnographic realism (as the films of Francois Truffaut, the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., or the music of Frank Zappa have been for Ruby), but rather that the reflexive aesthetic fostered in Reality TV shows must be understood as *a cultural practice in and of itself*, deserving of

and subject to ethnographic inquiry (in the same way that all media practices are; see Mahon 2000; Ginsburg et al 2002; Askew & Wilk 2002).

Instead, my position on reflexivity reflects that of Annelise Riles (2001), whose ethnographic work with a Fijian NGO brought her to terms with the fact that the very practices once deemed 'anthropological' or 'social scientific' are already at work in the world among those with whom she would study. Thus, when approaching the familiar world of fax machines, copywriting, and diagrams, Riles was plagued by the theoretical deficiencies of traditional anthropological categories and concepts, which, when applied to 'the Network'—of which anthropologists, political activists, international aid workers, media producers, etc. are all nodes—fail to yield a novel perspective. The version of reflexivity that she proffers, then, involves re-thinking the line that we once believed bracketed anthropology from 'society,' as well as a complication of ethnographic knowledge production vis-à-vis the reflexive practices outside the academy. Whereas for Ruby it is the ethnographer's undeniable positionality or situated-ness that must be problematized and exposed, for Riles "[w]hat is problematized... is not so much my position in the field as the way the field is both within and without myself" (2001: 20). Amid highly reflexive media practices, reflexivity-*qua*-anthropological-realism is exactly that which thrusts us back into the Network and inadvertently reproduces the ethnographic subject/object of inquiry. If we take a naïve realist/reflexivist approach to the genre of ethnography, we only reproduce the discourse of the Real. Only by grappling with reflexivity itself, as an aesthetic and as a cultural practice, can we turn the Network "inside out" and problematize the fact that we constantly (re)produce and transform Reality.

*pop/vigilante*

In this thesis, I examine the production practices of Rissa Asnan, an Indonesian-American media-maker whose adoption of Reality TV's reflexive aesthetic taps into the genre's televisual discourses of the Real. Like the social experiment-themed programs that I mentioned above, which have as their premise a narrative of cross-cultural contact and self-reflexive transformation, Rissa's produced a Reality show wherein Americans were introduced to Indonesian culture through the lens of the country's most popular genre of music, *dangdut*. Cultural difference is proven—through a deployment of Reality's aesthetics—to be surmountable through experiential encounters. The show, titled *Dangdut in America (DIA)*, is meant to function as a corrective to what she perceives to be the flawed moral economy of Indonesia's burgeoning middle-class culture. Working independently, Rissa believes that *DIA* is charged with a powerful valence of global sociality, one capable of transforming and enlightening Indonesia's post-dictatorship cultural economy. Where Neoliberalism's promises of utopian multiculturalism have failed, the qualities of *dangdut*—once associated with a rural and backward persona—might be transformed and reinvigorated through their new connection to the powerful image of Americans. *Dangdut*, once a society-internal emblem of national identity, can be reconstituted instead as an emblem of Indonesia's place in a global pop-cultural economy.

In the late capitalist milieu, Neoliberal imperatives to let market forces guide state action have produced a wealth of "global vigilantes" (Pratten & Sen 2007). Vigilantes are those that, by violence or other means, seek to govern where the state has failed. The essays featured in Pratten & Sen's (2007) timely volume, *Global Vigilantes*, illustrate the scale and scope of independent justice around the globe, bringing a comparative perspective to bear on seemingly disparate incidents. However, unaccounted for are the non-violent means by which non-state individuals assume what

is typically the state's governmental responsibility, especially in the realms of cultural identity management. Rissa's is a project of non-violent vigilantism, articulated through a reflexive aesthetic of producing Reality. Where the state has failed to manage Indonesia's identity in a global cultural economy, Rissa feels compelled to assume this responsibility.

Soon after the completion of *DIA*, Rissa began to document the trials and tribulations that she encountered working as an independent media producer. The Reality of *DIA* assumed a privileged place within this emergent narrative, as she struggled to locate a television network that could see the value inherent in her newly completed media product. In this way, she extended the reflexivity already characteristic of *DIA*, portraying herself as a victim of the television networks' flawed moral economy and their inability to see the value in her work. This narrative was deployed in a number of different ways and to a number of different audiences—including academics, the Indonesian and American presses, and members of the Indonesian parliament and diplomatic circle. But unlike other Reality television programming, Rissa's performance of reflexivity expanded outside the parameters of the television show and, as I intend to demonstrate, seeks to offer an alternative Reality, one sensitive to the symbolic violence borne of Indonesia's post-coloniality: the violence of absence, of minimal representational presence, in a global pop cultural economy.

By telling Rissa's story, I address ethnographically the question of reflexivity as a performance of Reality, but must do so within its complex context. This entails attending to how performances of Reality work to reformulate the emblems of Indonesian national identity vis-à-vis circulating representations of America. I begin by briefly outlining Indonesia's recent political history as a preface to a brief discussion of dangdut, the genre of pop music at the heart of *DIA*. I then introduce Rissa more formally, providing some background on her career as a media-maker in order to

contextualize the present series of media productions and practices. It was during the production of *DIA* that I conducted both formal and informal interviews with Rissa and others involved in the show, as well as ethnographic participant-observation. I discuss the production of *DIA*, its after-math, and the strategic deployment of the show's Reality in a host of situations. Throughout the essay, I illustrate how Rissa's reflexive practices change over time—flexing and adapting to new circumstances as they arise, and continuously enabling her intervention. In conclusion, I discuss how these reflexive practices, as well as the intervention that they enable, are situated within a late capitalist or Neoliberal milieu.

## Part II

### *the new order*

In 1997, an economic crisis swept across Southeast Asia. In 1998, General Soeharto—elected in 1967 as Indonesia’s second president, after a US-backed military coup in 1965 (Mulligan 2004)—was removed from power. Over the thirty-one (official) years of his reign, Soeharto’s New Order regime developed a reputation as one of the most corrupt of the third world dictatorships. Prescribing a rigorous dose of developmental and infrastructural programs, Soeharto oversaw Indonesia’s political alignment with the US and other powerful business- and resource-oriented nations. It was his alignment with the so-called First World that secured his lengthy tenure.

Externally, Soeharto’s devotion to Cold War era Capitalism—and his alliance with the US—played a significant role in the inter-national politics of Southeast Asia. Its geographical proximity to Vietnam, its bounty of resources, and its sprawling geographical expanse throughout the Pacific all worked to make Indonesia a valuable asset to US interests. Internally, the government enforced strict censorship regulations and a regiment of anti-communist propaganda through its newly achieved infrastructural feats, the most important of which was the expansion of State-run mass media outlets, climaxing with the launch of Palapa, a satellite television broadcast system (Barker 2005; Hobart 2008). While international capital from the Global North was able to flow freely through Indonesia’s developing economy to extract raw materials with little or no tariffs or international fees, this blossoming Neoliberal, “free market” ideology did not extend to include Indonesia’s burgeoning network of mass media outlets.

By the late 1980s, however, the New Order administration was floundering. With Soeharto’s greatest infrastructural accomplishments nearly two decades in the



past, his authoritarian dictatorial stylings were beginning to spoil and the regime's record-breaking levels corruption were becoming evident (see "Suharto Tops Corruption Rankings" 2004). Both "inside and outside Indonesia, authoritarianism was seen as the price the country paid for development, a view that served the interests of Western governments keen to support the operations of multinational oil and mineral companies in Indonesia" (Vickers 2005: 196)—classic neo-colonialism. And yet, in what now seems like a positive feedback loop, increases in the levels of corruption among Soeharto's cadre were met by increases of repressive State action.<sup>3</sup> Censorship of the State's broadcasting system reached an all-time high. As a response, the growing number of NGOs across the archipelago started coordinating with activists from Indonesia's fledgling middle class, publicizing protests and circulating illicit literature that promoted liberal democracy and freedom of speech. NGOs relied on their knack for drawing support from international agencies and eventually won the financial backing of the World Bank, which had by then come to the realization "that it was almost impossible to work through the corruption of the New Order" (Vickers 2005: 197). While drastic levels of poverty characterized life for millions across the archipelago, it was the interests of the burgeoning middle class that drove dissent against the New Order.

On 9 November 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the end of the Cold War. While the US announced its victory over communism, there was little room left for the now-antiquated Cold War era dictatorships like Soeharto's New Order. Soeharto was thus forced to loosen his dictatorial reigns over Indonesia in the face of the US's new dream of global democracy. This heralded a new policy of 'openness' (Vickers 2005). But while the field of mass media in Indonesia was transformed by the

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<sup>3</sup> Soeharto's family and friends have also been implicated in corruption scandals. In recent news, an Indonesian court has cleared him of an alleged misuse of \$400 Million in State funds (see "Tommy Suharto [sic.] Cleared of Corruption" 2009).

introduction and legalization of privately owned media outlets (see Lindsay 1997; Lockard 1996; Wallach 2008; Hobart & Fox 2008)—including the introduction of MTV Indonesia (Wallach 2002)<sup>4</sup>—the intra-national press was still monitored and censored by and large. The liberalization of the economy and the media that was achieved, regardless of Soeharto's motivations, seemed on the whole to appease protests against the New Order's censorship policies to a mild degree, delaying what in hindsight appeared to be Soeharto's inevitable demise.

The influx of private and transnational corporations was not, as Soeharto had promised, relieving the nation's problems. The late 1980s and early '90s witnessed a rapid demographic transition in Indonesia: "the gap between rich and poor became a gap between urban and country dwellers, as rice production flattened out in the mid-1990s, and Indonesia moved further away from its rural roots" (Vickers 2005: 199). Cities, and especially the large Javanese cities, Jakarta and Yogyakarta, became the loci for the rising middle classes—a phenomenon that would geographically alter the hierarchic fields of class relations across the country and reinforce stereotypes about the *kampung* (rural, backward) poor. The Java-centric national centers were also home to the newly privatized nation-wide media networks and were thus over-determined in their media representations. Jakarta, in Geertz's words, is the place "where Indonesia is supposed to be summarized but perhaps is manufactured" (cited in Wallach 2008).

Soeharto remained in power until 1998. By then, the middle classes were no longer the only groups fed up with the New Order; the destitute poor, the *lumpenized*, would join the ranks in protest and refuse the monetary bribes from Soeharto's GOLKAR party to solicit their votes (Vickers 2005: 202). It seems that the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis was the straw that broke the camel's back, a boiling point for those who

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<sup>4</sup> See Luvaas (in press) and Wallach (2008) for detailed accounts of the introduction of private and international media outlets, and its subsequent impact on Indonesian pop-culture at large.

had tolerated so much for so long: “Amid violent student protests and rioting and mayhem in cities throughout the country—especially in Jakarta—Soeharto stepped down on May 21, 1998” (Wallach 2008: 11).

In the years since Soeharto’s resignation—the period known as *Reformasi*—attempts to reverse New Order corruption have been met with a number of difficulties. Anti-Chinese riots as well as violence in Aceh and East Timor continued well past Soeharto’s demise, as did the economic hardships and the increasing gap between rich and poor. After the Asian Financial Crisis, the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) interventions were not enough to rescue the vanishing savings of the middle classes, which had practically disappeared over night (Vickers 2005: 210). In the face of class antagonisms as well as regional conflict, little seemed to unite the archipelago. Though Indonesia has as its national motto *bhinneka tunggal ika*, ‘unity in diversity,’ to reflect its cultural and geographical diversity, most predicted that the separatist movements would successfully secede and thereby dismantle Indonesia’s fragile nationhood. But secular nationalism prevailed and Indonesia remained in tact. As Wallach (2008) has argued, the answer to the mystery of Indonesia’s persistent cohesion is found not in the realpolitik of the historical moment, but in the nation’s peculiar world of popular culture. Dangdut, the nation’s most popular genre of music, has played a particularly significant role in buttressing ideological projects of secular nationalism in the face of immanent disintegration.

### *dangdut*

For many working class Indonesians living in the US, dangdut functions as a significant source for nostalgic remembrance of life back home. It indexes an unrehearsed

Indonesian-ness—"what the streets of Jakarta *sound* like."<sup>5</sup> There is something about the quality of the music that has as its only analogue Indonesian society itself. Yet for the more wealthy and landed Indonesians living abroad, dangdut represents little more than campy cultural baggage, in the same way that some Americans might dismiss Country music. Regardless of these class-based distinctions, it is undeniable that dangdut's presence in Indonesia is a significant social fact.

Emerging in the 1970s as a unique portmanteau of rock, R&B, reggae, Malaysian and Portuguese folk, and most of all Bollywood cinema soundtracks, and championing a characteristically Indonesian variety of Muslim populism that praises hard work, modesty, and traditional values through a danceable beat and simple lyrics (see Weintraub 2008b), dangdut is one of the few cultural forms that is truly national in scope. The term 'dangdut' itself was coined after the music was beginning to take shape and is claimed to be onomatopoeic, imitating the sound of a *gendang* drum, the Indonesian variation of an Indian tabla (Frederick 1982; Wallach 2002; Weintraub 2008a). Rhoma Irama, dangdut's self-proclaimed King and the music's greatest champion, claims that the term was originally used pejoratively by the wealthy to describe the sounds associated with the rural poor (Weintraub 2008b: 63). The music's rise to national recognition coincided with the early years of the Soeharto era (Wallach 2008: 13) and, after being presented in the media as "the music of the people," become heated terrain for class-based ideologies in the New Order years (Weintraub 2008b; Frederick 1982).

Throughout the 1970s, dangdut was enjoyed nearly exclusively among lower class male youth in Jakarta and other major cities, and throughout much of the '80s, it could be experienced only in dancehall settings (see Wallach 2008; Weintraub 2008a).

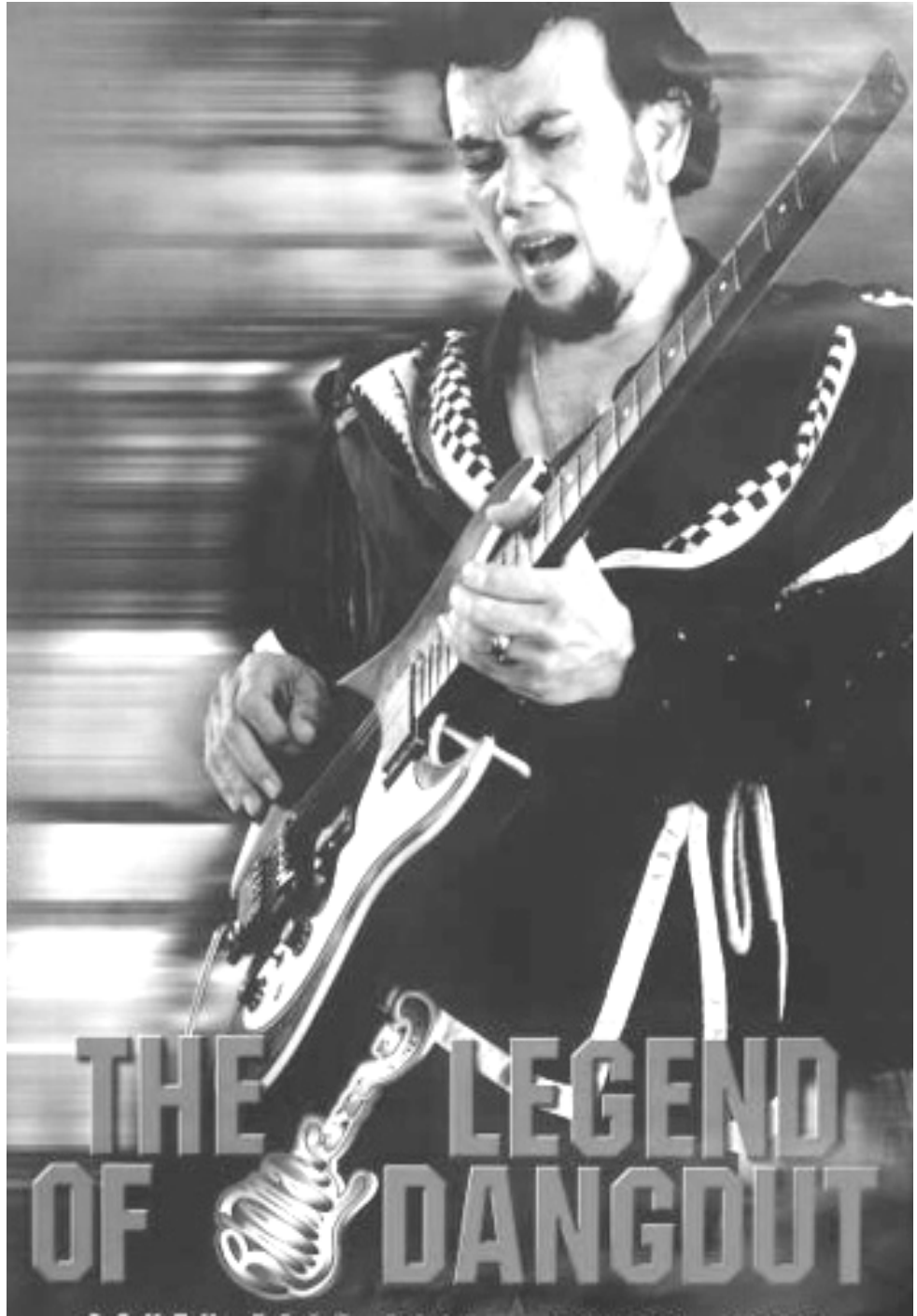
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<sup>5</sup> When interviewing individuals from a fairly young Indonesian immigrant community in South Philadelphia, this was a common response when asked about dangdut. Fieldnotes, Philadelphia, PA: 16 February 2007.

The exception to this early rule was Rhoma Irama, whose career as a cinema star complemented his charismatic stage presence and narrativized his “populist chic” aesthetic (Frederick 1982). In these years, the burgeoning middle classes sneered and jeered at dangdut—an effort to distinguish themselves and carve out their own niche (see Bourdieu 1984; Liechty 2002)—in seeking as much social distance from the music as possible. Only later did the genre’s popularity expand, in tandem with the ubiquitous explosion of media technologies (such as commercial radio, television, tape cassettes, VCD, and, more recently, the Internet) across the archipelago in the early and mid-1990s (Barendregt & van Zanten 2002; Lindsay 1997). Weintraub (2008a) argues that after the fall of the Soeharto regime, television, in particular, was responsible for dangdut’s explosion in popularity—especially with the urban, middle classes: “Television moved dangdut from the streets, food stalls and buses into the home, creating new social spaces for the reception of dangdut. The market for dangdut expanded beyond live performance, attended mostly by males, to televised performance watched by females in the home” (370).

It is necessary here to emphasize the role of Rhoma Irama, a figure already well known in the ethnomusicological literature (cf. Frederick 1982; Lockard 1996; Taylor 1997; Wallach 2008; Weintraub 2008a and 2008b; Yampolsky n.d.). Born in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Irama came of age in Jakarta during the 1960s. This decade saw the rise of several ‘one-hit wonders,’ including Koes Plus, Mercy’s, Panbers, and Bimbo. Each of these groups sought to “modernize” Indonesian music by hybridizing the more “traditional” *Melayu* sound with that of British Invasion and US rock bands (Frederick 1982.). Irama, along with his group Soneta, tailored the dangdut style in contrast to these fads: the base form would remain *Melayu* with stylistic variations derived from popular music from the Middle East, while any influence from the West would remain

secondary (Frederick 1982; Wallach 2002, 2008; Weintraub 2008a, 2008b). The difference, though perhaps subtle to the untrained ear, made a difference.



*Figure 1, Rhoma Irama*

As dangdut matured, Irama began developing a style as a lyricist that would only further propel his fame. Although the characterizations of him as “the most powerful Muslim leader in Indonesia” (cited in Lockard 1996) are likely exaggerations, his predominantly populist lyrics promoted a sprightly yet nearly-militant Islam that rang true for millions of fans throughout the archipelago. As his fame continued to build, his rags-to-riches story was chronicled in several loosely autobiographical films throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. The romantic themes construable from each film heralded Irama as the harbinger of altruistic modesty and success, or, on the other hand, as the paternalistic defender of all things good and Muslim (Frederick 1982: 112-119). This spokesman-like persona led him to fill an unofficial role as a representative of the Indonesian masses and, subsequently, as a thorn in Soeharto’s side.

Irama’s popular-representative status was compounded by media depictions of dangdut as having captured Indonesia’s “soul”—its wills and desires, heralded as “the music of *the people*.” In his historical account of mediated representations of dangdut’s audience, Weintraub (2008b) captures well the process whereby “the people” was discursively constructed as historical reality. As dangdut began to accrue currency among the middle classes in the late ‘80s, it developed a powerful position in New Order politics. The overtly classist discourse of the 1970s and ‘80s gave way to rhetoric which—at least publicly—praised the masses as the core of Indonesia’s national character (2008: 67-68; see also Frederick 1982). Since then, promoting dangdut to the fore of national identity has been a recurrent and almost sisyphusean project, which, significantly, has never fully been achieved.<sup>6</sup> Dangdut still retains its *kampung* and backward connotations alongside these egalitarian and populist chic discourses.

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<sup>6</sup> Weintraub, personal communication: 30 November 2008.

**Box 2: “Dangdut is the Music of My Country”**

The hit video for Project Pop’s single, “Dangdut is the Music of My Country,”<sup>7</sup> begins with steely guitar distortion that is reminiscent of American rap-metal. The band’s musicians jump up and down in sync with the heavy metal rhythm. Heads—shaved bald or with hair dyed candy-apple red—bob up and down over electric guitars. Meanwhile, rough-edged teenagers strap up in preparation for what appears to be a battle between rival gangs. Soon, dozens are pouring down a stairwell, exhuming ferocity, and in an instant, they are on the street, in an alley, squaring off with their rivals. The first gang is dressed in all black, while the others are clad in white. The gang’s leaders bark the songs lyrics at each other in fiery bursts: “[Those] who don’t recognize the differences [were] not properly taught!” The verse’s lyrics go on to highlight the seemingly irrefutable cultural differences between Indonesia’s many regions, especially those where conflict is seated. And while it appears that the animosity between these gangs is about to erupt in violence, a murky figure suddenly emerges out of a trashcan, like a cobra summoned by song, and begins to sing, “[Who] can be angry when we unite [through] music?” A girl amongst the black-clad gang takes out a mini-stereo and presses play on the tape cassette, singing along in English to the wistful melody: “Dangdut is the music of my *country*, dangdut is the music *my country*.” The music had abruptly shifted from rap-metal to classic dangdut and, to the gang leaders’ chagrin, every member of both gangs starts to dance in together in unison, in cohesion, in solidarity...

Project Pop’s video engages in what Wallach (2002) calls “the metadiscourse of dangdut genre as a social unifier” (311). In the press, narratives abound in which dangdut is used to diminish deep-seated social boundaries or to dispel immanent violence or conflict. Consider these two examples offered in Wallach’s dissertation. First, a dangdut concert at Salemba Prison in Jakarta, where “it looked as though there was no distance between the staff and the prison inmates. They were carried away in a spirit of togetherness” ([www.liputan6.com](http://www.liputan6.com), cited in Wallach 2002: 311); second, a political demonstration against the military’s role in Indonesian politics by college students who, after speeches of rising intensity, began to hear the sound of dangdut music getting louder and louder until “seconds later, scores of soldiers started to dance in front of the students. The show lasted only about fifteen minutes until the protesters left” (Hasani 2001, cited in Wallach: 311). These two scenes, plucked from the print media, are meant to illustrate the regularity and normalcy of dangdut’s purported ability to unite and pacify conflict. In light of these two scenes taken from the press, the alleyway face-off depicted in Project Pop’s video seems a much more realistic scenario.

Despite the fact that dangdut’s fan base was still shaped by the boundaries of social stratification, the ability to conjure a malleable public, with all the connotations of the lower classes, became an increasingly valuable asset for politicians—and especially

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<sup>7</sup> The video of “Dangdut is the Music of my Country” is available at: <http://vodpod.com/watch/399104-project-pop-dangdut-is-the-music-of-my-country>



for Soeharto in the years leading to his demise. Thus, Irama, who had become famous on a populist platform critical of the New Order's policies and practices, turned to lead the dangdut masses right into Soeharto's hands. National Geographic took note of this: "By the late 1980s, the superstars of dangdut had become fabulously wealthy, and Irama reconciled with the government by joining the dictatorial ruling *GOLKAR* party" (McGraw n.d.). While some of his fans may have felt betrayed by Irama's decision, there was no doubt that his support—and that of "the people" that he represented—could make or break an election and pacify the rising tide of dissent against New Order politics after the Cold War.

Dangdut was thus implicated in the New Order's nation-building project as a means for accessing a qualitatively new nation-wide public, one that embodied the needs and desires of *the* Indonesian people. To be sure, this discursive construct was buttressed by dangdut's widespread popularity and its regional and local reproductions. To point to the absurdity of this construct: while the various regions integrated into dangdut's fan base may share a similar socioeconomic status on a nation-wide scale, their political interests are irreducible to their class, let alone their interest in dangdut. So while the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, everyone, it was said, was listening to dangdut. That the music is hailed as that of the people must therefore be understood within a delicate framework, one that considers the mutual constitution of dangdut and New Order nation-building politics—including, but not limited to: secularization, middle class culture-building, governmental and non-governmental development projects, and the rise of the State run and later commercialized mass media.

After Soeharto's fall, dangdut again came to the fore in public discourse and politics. In 2003, the body of twenty-four-year-old East Javanese dangdut singer and dancer Inul Daratista became the focal point of debate in the Indonesian public sphere.

Her dancing—which she has called *goyang ngebora* (the ‘drilling dance’)—was declared too explicit, “and therefore *haram*, forbidden by Islam” (Weintraub 2008a: 368). Religious organizations and powerful Muslim councils called for action against the scapegoat/martyr Inul, staging protests at the filming of her television performances and urging police to block her concerts (*ibid.*). Rhoma Irama took a stance by placing a “virtual, but not enforceable, ban on her, stating that she was degrading Islam” (Effendi, cited in Weintraub 2008a: 368)<sup>8</sup>. The ensuing public debate—which took place through every possible medium and has even made international news (*ibid.*)—has become known as “Inulmania” and, for many, represents the source of a crucial schism within the history of dangdut: whereas Rhoma Irama and his generation, who very self-consciously stood for righteous principles, represents the old dangdut, Inul’s cohort represents the new and young generation.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, two scholars have examined Inulmania regarding the phenomenon as a token of the state of civil society in contemporary Indonesia. Weintraub’s analysis (2008a) regards Inulmania as Indonesia’s attempt to rehearse an emergent democracy in the years that followed Soeharto’s demise. The female body, performed by Inul specifically, served as the stage on which competing discourses and ideologies could compete. Mulligan (2004), on the other hand, views Inulmania as a reiteration of the New Order’s oppressive public discourses about women. Specifically, the Inul controversy mirrored a propagandized ordeal that dates to 1965, wherein the explicit dancing of (supposedly) communist women was used to bolster Soeharto’s platform of decency and Islamic traditionalism. Inul’s dancing, like the communist women from 1965, performs a sexuality that was interpreted to be dangerous in the face of both

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<sup>8</sup> Weintraub makes clear in a note that Irama’s prohibition did successfully enforce one rule: Inul was banned from covering any of his songs (2008a: n. 8), a move that further imbued his songs, and his status, with a conservative value, distinguishing him from the newer generation of dangdut performers.

<sup>9</sup> Fieldnotes, Wilmington, DE: 12 November 2008.

internal instability and external cultural threats, including that of a perceived American media imperialism: “Inul symbolises both the hypocrisy of the internal patriarchy of the conservative [Muslim] clerical agenda on the one hand, and the fear that Western influences such as increased nudity, in the form of films and popular magazines imported from the West, are threatening the national cultural boundaries on the other hand” (Mulligan 2004: 14). Whether it was a “rehearsal” of an emergent democracy or a reiteration of the New Order’s tired propaganda, Inulmania speaks nonetheless to dangdut’s relevancy and ubiquity in the Indonesian public sphere. The music’s discursive ties to the land and “the people” make contentious points like Inul’s body all the more powerful and engaging. It is in this sense that Frederick (1982) has argued that dangdut must be understood simultaneously as a variety of music with its own charisma—its uncanny ability to continually captivate audiences over four decades—as well as a lens for the country’s delicate intra-national politics (Frederick 1982).

In the following section, I introduce Rissa Asnan, an Indonesian-American media-maker whose project *Dangdut in America* has the potential, according to Wallach (personal communication, 2009), of marking a new era in dangdut’s history. Like Frederick’s claim that dangdut offers a unique sociological reflection of Indonesia’s public sphere, *DIA* might best be understood as a lens for grappling with the politics of global ‘cultural’ forms in an era of neoliberal reformism. The narratives and meta-narratives embedded within *Dangdut in America* are drawn from totalizing discourses of multiculturalism and valorized by the show’s aesthetically generated Reality.

## Part III

### *a brief media/life history*

Man, I'm telling you, I have a *big dream*. I just want to share [this] with them [Indonesians]: if you have a big dream, you just work hard for it, and you believe in yourself—that if you work hard, it can happen. Let the people put you down, it's okay, just move on. Lot of people put me down, but doesn't matter... that's how I learn, and I believe in miracle, because I been working *so hard* and suddenly *this* come, suddenly *that* come. It's just—out of the blue! Because I had no connections, like a president's daughter [does]! I'm a housewife! And that can only happen from here, from United States! You know what I mean? So I always say, hey, look, what people say about it, they are absolutely right, you know? And that's how I think America is number one, because look at it! Barack Obama! It can only happen here, in United States [Rissa Asnan; Fieldnotes, 12 November 2008].

After a trip to Disney World when she was thirteen, Rissa knew that her dream was to move to the United States. “Since then, I said ‘this is it.’ This is where I wanted to go for vacation always... My mom always offered for me to go to Europe, and I said no, I don’t want to go to Europe, I just love the United States.” Her dream came true, so to speak, when her mother—educated and successful, middle class and single—was able to support her through college in the States. She moved to northern California and attended West Valley College for two years, and then got married at the age of 22. Her husband’s career as a professor of electrical and computer engineering first took her to Charlotte, North Carolina, and then to a suburb of Wilmington, Delaware, where the couple currently lives.

During Rissa’s first few years in these suburban communities, she started getting involved with fund-raising and event organizing. In Charlotte, she raised money for the Indonesian Student Society at UNC. With the International Women’s Club of Delaware and the Organization for Charity to Indonesian Children, she organized traditional Indonesian dance and luncheon events, and a number of fund-raisers whose proceeds paid for elementary school tuition for disadvantaged Indonesian youth, respectively.

The list goes on. Already, this was a stark change from the upwardly mobile life that Rissa had known growing up in Indonesia: “I would never have done it [volunteer] when I was in Indonesia, because I would not know what ‘volunteer’ is. I just thought, ‘Wow. It makes me feel good to do something for somebody else.’”

But after several years of the volunteerist-housewife life, Rissa decided that she wanted to become more focused on her work, become “more professional with it.” Event organizing was the side of fund-raising that Rissa enjoyed most, and thus decided to found her own company to be more wholly devoted to it. Specifically, she found herself excited to organize events around Indonesian arts and culture. It was a way for her to feel that she was maintaining her Indonesian identity. Her start-up company, NSR Productions, was founded in 2004 to “promote cultural exchange between Indonesia and United States through entertainment and music” (NSR 2007). And, with the luck that has seemed to guide her throughout the unique entertainment “experiment” that is NSR, Rissa found that, by chance, she shared the neighborhood with a famous Indonesian rock singer, Atiek CB. CB agreed to perform at Rissa’s first independent show. The event, titled *Malam Gembira*, was organized as a charity fund-raiser and was held in New Jersey on 28 August 2004. The show was well attended by members of the local, somewhat wealthy, Indonesian community there.

Although Rissa had previously volunteered with some Javanese and Balinese traditional dance performances, this was the first time that she had organized a “modern” musical event. Atiek CB was not what you would call traditional Indonesian music. In retrospect, she explained, it made her realize how nostalgic she was for Indonesia and the Jakarta of her youth: “Oh my *god*,” she recalled. “I miss my *own* music—my own *language*!—after being so long in the United States!” After this initial run, Rissa was so energized at the prospect of coordinating Indonesian music events that she invited a celebrated and famous Indonesia singer, Thomas Djorgghi, to perform for

her second NSR produced event. Thomas, whom Rissa charmed during his visit, was not, like CB, a rock singer; he was a dangdut star. Under the title “Dangdut Mania,” Rissa organized two consecutive concerts for Thomas, the first in Philadelphia on 7 May 2005 and a second on 8 May in Washington, DC.

Dangdut Mania, unlike the first event, turned out to be disappointing for Rissa. The shows were under-attended compared with *Malam Gembira* in New Jersey the year before. In recalling Dangdut Mania, Rissa expressed her frustration with the Indonesian communities in Philadelphia and DC:

**Rissa:** Because when I had invited them, it seems like people that came here [migrated to the United States], they have forgotten, you know, their culture. Their *own* culture! And when I’m here, after being here for so long, I felt like I *miss* my own culture. You know? And I love America, but I also miss my own culture. So I thought it’s weird, because I had invited him [Thomas Djorgghi] and in the Indonesian community, here come like no one to support it at that time. They were like, “why should we watch that?” And all kinds of gossip—

**Aaron:** Did they know who [Thomas Djorgghi] was?

**R:** Yeah, they know who he was, but I think because they are here, they felt like they’re already somebody, so they had forgotten who they are... With the dollar and all that, they think they are rich already, because they are here. So, that should make them, I think, snobbish. You know what I mean? They’ve forgotten who they are, you know.

Rissa saw the Indonesian community members who were not interested in coming out to support Dangdut Mania as totally dismissive of their Indonesian identity. They thus did not grasp what Rissa was attempting to do. These “snobbish” Indonesian immigrants still saw dangdut as *kampung* and unrefined—part of their Indonesian ‘cultural baggage’ as new and assimilating immigrants. For Rissa, there was something exceptional, unique, and novel about bringing a dangdut star to Philadelphia and Washington, DC—something that was obviously important for her own morale, and that she believed could be helpful for others, who, like her, were nostalgic for life back in the archipelago. After all these years in the States, Rissa realized that she had

undergone a transformation of some kind. Dangdut, which she was wholly uninterested in while growing up, was suddenly valuable as a token of Indonesian identity. She began to ask, what are these communities missing? Why don't they see the value in this? These Indonesian-Americans, to Rissa, seemed to have forgotten who they are—forgotten their culture—and were unable to appreciate the possibility of a fruitful exchange between 'American and Indonesian cultures,' or even an intermingling between the two. Dangdut has its place: the streets of Jakarta. Without an appreciation for culture, in all of its iterations, how can one even begin to make sense of dangdut in Philadelphia and DC?

Fueling this frustration, Rissa herself was once naïve and ignorant of value in the same way this group was. This was, of course, when she was younger and enthralled with American culture. She spent her childhood and teenage years yearning for the United States and was thus dismissive of most things Indonesian, especially dangdut—just like those who “paid no attention” to Dangdut Mania. When asked if she would even like dangdut—let alone love it—if she had remained in Indonesia, the answer was a hesitant yes with a caveat. The realization that she came to, and which would be a motivating theme throughout her media-making career, is that it was only after living in the United States for an extended period of time—and really becoming acculturated to American middle class values—that she was able to appreciate Indonesian culture, and especially dangdut. “One thing I can tell you, I do what I'm doing right now because I live in the United States.” Rissa understood this lack of cultural appreciation to be a fundamental flaw endemic to Indonesians, especially the middle and upper classes. The ready dismissal of Indonesian genres like dangdut and the subsequent ignorance of the “value” inherent in these cultural forms—the value in what *she* was doing—was indicative of a larger cultural pathology, one that prohibits them from “doing something better for [their] own country”:

I think in Indonesia, because the rich and poor are *so*, you know, way out there, or low down here—so I felt like, where's the people that care about someone else's? And this is what I see: Rich people there being a housewife, all they think of is themselves, where over here, even rich people, they still volunteer.

'Culture,' ironically, had no place in Indonesia's moral economy, nothing valuable bound those with wealth and those without. All there was for the rich was money. In the absence of non-monetary value, the rich are able to maintain a seemingly unbridgeable social distance between themselves and the poor. It is by no accident that dangdut has a central role here: since its earliest years, the promise of dangdut's egalitarian narrative has been its potential to bridge the expanding hierarchy of a widening socioeconomic divide.

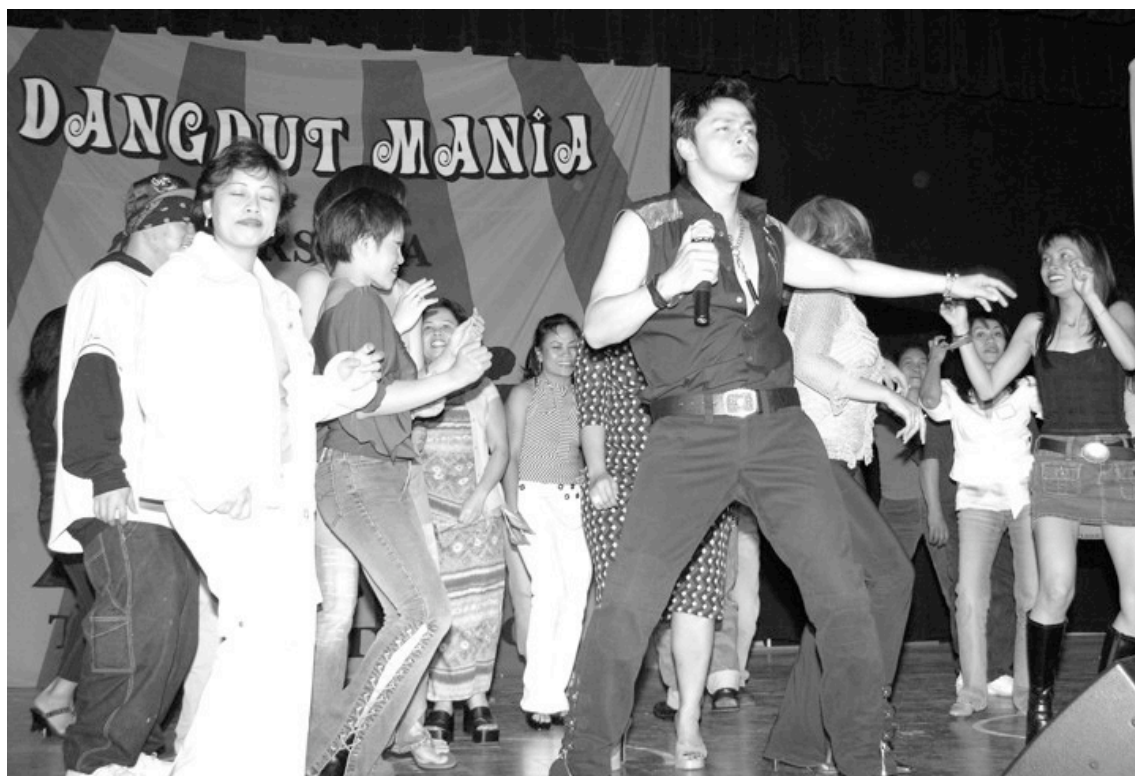


Figure 2, Thomas Djorgi at "Dangdut Mania" (courtesy of NSR Productions 2008)



*"dreams come true"*

While disappointing, Dangdut Mania ultimately received enough buzz that Rissa was able to put on a similar event later that year. "Dangdut Goes to America" was based on the same premise as Dangdut Mania, but with a different dangdut singer, Lisa Natalia. This time, Rissa was again left dissatisfied but for a different reason.

People [were] loving it, and they enjoy it—but then I see that it's *only Indonesians* watching, and Indonesian singers coming—not involving any Americans. 'Hmmm,' I said. 'Okay, I'm tired of that. I want to see something different.'

She was growing tired of organizing Indonesian rock and dangdut concerts that would be attended only by Indonesian ex-pats. The cross-cultural element so readily apparent in her company's mission statement—"to promote cultural exchange between Indonesia and the United States"—was missing. In her next project, she vowed, she would do something that would deal directly with America and American culture.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia, a Reality TV program titled *Akademi Fantasi Indosiar* (AFI), had just completed its 2005 season. The show, like those of so many other Reality shows, was purchased from a large corporation—in this case, Endemol—which produces and sells television show models. Once purchased, the Endemol formulas are then 'hybridized' to fit their host nation's standards of language, dress, celebrities, etc. (Kraidy 2005; Moran 1998). This particular show, which in other countries is typically titled with some variation of "Star Academy" or just "The Academy," circulates through more than 50 countries worldwide.<sup>10</sup> It's premise:

[C]ontestants live in a boarding school called "The Academy," managed by a director, and various teachers coach them in several artistic disciplines. The participants are filmed with hidden cameras throughout the day and night (an idea borrowed from another of Endemol's major Reality shows *Big Brother*). Once a week, the contestants have to face a prime time show, where they sing the song they've preparing [*sic.*] during the week before, as well as recapping their trials and tribulations at The

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<sup>10</sup> See Kraidy 2008 for an analysis of the relationship between *Star Academy* and modernity in the Arab world.

Academy from the past week. The live show will often feature special guest stars, with which some of the contestants have the opportunity to sing. Based on the judges' verdicts and viewer voting, the weakest contestant is dropped. The eventual winner is awarded a record deal, or a similar prize. [<http://dreamscometrue.home.att.net>]

After the season's end, Rissa approached Indosiar, AFI's host network, about doing a spin-off Reality mini-series. The result, titled *Dreams Come True*, was a major success. Broadcast nationally in Indonesia over four episodes in July and August of 2006, *Dreams Come True* followed AFI's four finalists (Adit, Indri, Tia and Ade) on a trip to the US—their first.

After arriving, Rissa met the finalists and the Indonesian film crew at JFK airport to begin their tour down the Northeast corridor. Their experience involved a wide array of “typical” American activities, including:

visiting American cultural landmarks (Ground Zero, White House, National Monument, Grand Central Terminal), performing American past-time activities (such as attending a Phillies baseball game and visiting a Harley Davidson motorcycle party), volunteering for American non-profit organizations (the Habitat for Humanity, the Stonegates nursing home and the Emmanuel Soup Kitchen), and visiting American businesses (e.g. a Harley Davidson dealership, a micro-brewery, and a farm) [[www.nsrproductions.com](http://www.nsrproductions.com)].

At the end of the program, the AFI finalists held a free public concert in Annandale, Virginia.

The premise of *Dreams Come True* was to introduce these young musicians, as well as the Indonesian audience, to “a different side of United States,” the side that one can really only get to know through extended contact and immersion. Of Rissa's design, the activities that she had planned for the group, she believed, represented the true core of American culture. Although having the opportunity to see a live filming at ABC's studios with a VIP pass, or catching a Beach Boys performance, or getting to sit in the Press Box at a Phillies game, may not be “typical American activities,” the show was most dramatically charged during those scenes in which the Indonesian finalists were

volunteering alongside Americans: the novel experience (for these young finalists) of helping fellow humans work through their misfortunes.

In presenting this to the Indonesian public, she felt she was challenging Indonesian conceptualizations of the US and Americans:

You know why? I think I observe everything. I went to Indonesia, and it's sad. It is sad, because I think nobody is guiding them. They think in United States, it's wild. [...] And people think because it's wild, you know, American, you know, all foreigner doing it, which is wrong I think. Somebody gotta show that the real thing is not like that. So that's one of the reasons that I think to invite Indonesian singers last time in 2006, the *AFI* winners. When they came here, I showed them that there is Habitat for Humanity. People volunteer, do good stuff for people who need it. I took them to the homeless [shelter]. We fed the homeless. So I showed them the other side of United States, and you know what, this is what we need to learn, the good part of United States. Don't think just bad stuff about the glamorous, the wildness of America. But so many other good sides that you can see.

Rissa believes that Indonesian conceptualizations of “America” are shaped by the Indonesian media system, which has, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, become increasingly “liberalized” and uncensored (see Boellstorff 2003). The wild simulacrum of America, as imagined by Indonesia, has appeared to inspire the likes of Inul Daratista and her controversial dancing. And though she feels that the demonization of Inul was extreme, Rissa too attributes the advent of the new dangdut— attractive female singers better known for their dancing than for the quality of their voice or songs, as opposed to the ‘traditional’ dangdut that was so populist and egalitarian—to the influence of American media imports. This is where her experiences as a seasoned American *and* Indonesian, a self-conscious transnational subjectivity, has been particularly clarifying, enabling her to “observe everything” and recognize the discrepancy between her own idea of what the US is and that construed by the Indonesian public. *Dreams Come True* was designed specifically to augment the typical American imported media. Utilizing a reflexive aesthetic, *Dreams Come True* presented audiences with the Real version of America, not Hollywood’s interpretation.

Volunteerism continued to play a significant role in portraying what, to Rissa, was the Real America:

**R:** I think that was really cool, having [the *AFI* finalists] come and do volunteer, and they were like crying too! Because they felt like so touched, you know, they wouldn't even think that, hey this is so different from what I'm imagining. You know, if [Indonesians] come here [to the US], they see that *real* life is so different from what they [were] imagining.

**A:** That kind of culture of volunteer work doesn't exist in Indonesia?

**R:** *No.* In Indonesia? Oh my god, no! And if I have that power, I want to teach them that! That's how you can make your own country better! You know you do something for yourself. Do something, instead of just talking, not doing anything. And that's what I wanted to send in the message. You know, start volunteering: you feel good, you help others, you know. There is nothing like that in Indonesia.

Volunteerism here stands in for the incongruity between levels of engagement in Indonesia and America's respective civil societies. One discrepancy is laid bare by comparing patterns in the narratives of socioeconomic mobility, which are so prominent in entertainment media everywhere. Celebrity rags-to-riches stories are common (think Eminem, and the same is true for Inul Daratista, Rhoma Irama, as well as these four *Akademi* finalists), but, to Rissa, they are particularly misguided and unchecked in Indonesia. This, she believes, is attributable to Indonesia's shared perception of America as overly wild and glamorous—a justification for the *nouveau riche* or the new middle classes to become completely enthralled with money. In Indonesia, Rissa observed that upward socioeconomic mobility is not succeeded by compassion and solidarity, as performed through what might best be understood as the *ritual* of volunteering. Rather, “moving up” is followed by a *contempt* for one's origins. We saw this with the immigrant communities who “paid no attention” to Rissa's dangdut concerts. To volunteer is to perform a connection across social gaps, to produce cultural similitude (and expel alterity) across socioeconomic strata, and to remember “where you come from.” To depict volunteering in America on Indonesian television waves was, for

Rissa, a way to kill two birds with one stone—to chop down the myth of wild America, while at the same time advocating the production of cultural similitude and solidarity in Indonesia.

*reality television, neoliberal governance*

In the Media Studies literature on Reality television, the most provocative is that which regards the genre as a technology of neoliberal governance. As “an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real” (Murray & Ouellette 2004: 2), Reality television emerged at a particular historical conjuncture. Ouellette & Hay (2008) maintain that it is no accident that the reinvention of television coincided with the reinvention of government. Historically, realist television had been tied to a characteristically *liberal* form of governance. A shift toward *neoliberal* governance was followed by increasingly self-conscious claims to reality. Whereas with the former, claims to reality served to buttress content, Reality TV’s content underlies its claims to reality.

Liberal government, as Rose (1996) points out, paradoxically becomes a mechanism for its own critique and regeneration. As a technology of liberal governance, documentary and public service formats, especially in the UK, offered critical assessments of both public and private institutions, seeking to promote a class-based collective subjectivity and to promote critical consciousness (Palmer 2003). In the US, however, factual and realist television was seen to be “abstract, didactic, unadorned, and dominated by academics, journalists, and other intellectual authorities” (Ouellette & Hays 2008: 3). This type of programming imagined itself pedagogical and the audiences massive, and the strategies of addressing the viewer were formulated accordingly. The audience was a collective, and treated as a crowd. American public television’s

didacticism proved economically untenable in the face of mass media's increasingly privatized business agenda. Niche markets emerged. Reaching out to 'the public,' the collective, floundered next to models of *empowerment through individualization*. Modes of address thus changed across various media platforms. The audience was transformed into the individual subject. Mass communication became conversation (Peters 2006) and any form of collective subjectivity building was dropped from the agenda.

These changes coincided with broader political economic changes on a global scale. With the advance of neoliberalism, the liberal concern for government reinvention was intensified to an unprecedented extent. The agenda of the IMF set the tempo. With deregulation becoming the norm, the desire now was to 'free' citizens from the burden of 'dependency' on national modes of governance entirely (Ouellette & Hay 2008: 19). With this transition into "advanced" or neoliberal governance, the project of welfare, once the State's ward, was "outsourced" to the private sector. This was thought "to improve upon the Welfare State by 'relocating' its focus on governing through social service in the realms of commerce and consumption" (38).

In this political ecology of deregulation, Reality television emerged to serve as both panoptical government lens and a platform to demonstrate, for and with viewers, the guidelines for proper self-governance and consumer behavior. In the UK, the former is of greater concern. Palmer (2003) writes that shows like *Big Brother* emerged as public space was becoming increasingly monitored by closed-circuit television (CCTV). In this case, Palmer argues, Reality TV serves to normalize panoptic surveillance.

In the US and elsewhere (see Onishi 2009), Reality TV's characteristically 'ordinary' participants—and, through mutual identification, the audience—are meant to be "transformed into the sort of citizen[s] who can be ruled through freedom, not control" (Ouellette & Hay 2008: 1). 'Freedom,' in the case of *Dreams Come True*, is making the choice to volunteer, to choose to do something to "make your own country

better.” As Rose (1999) goes great lengths to emphasize, freedom is not the absence of constraint, but is the positive and specific constitution of the subject as “free” (see also Foucault 1991). To be the type of free citizen who deserves his freedom—i.e., makes the right choices—in the neoliberal political economy is to volunteer (Hyatt 2001).

### *pax dangdutia: Dangdut in America*

Following *Dreams Come True*, Rissa considered briefly reviving the old trick: Pick a charity, invite a famous Indonesian performer to come to the States, rent a venue, advertise the event, etc. But this was proving pragmatically difficult:

I was about to invite another singer from Indonesia, but then I changed my mind because I thought, ‘they [the singers] don’t really appreciate it that much,’ because they think -- they’re so famous over there, but here they’re not internationally famous. You know what I mean? They’re famous in Indonesia, but not here. So sometimes, because I don’t have any sponsors, I don’t have, you know, anybody that support me. So I thought, if I did all that, and they don’t even know what I’ve been through, it’s just going to make me tired. So I want to do something that people can really appreciate. And I think that when I do things with Americans, I feel like they’re more appreciative for what I’m doing.

For one, Rissa was privately financing these NSR events. Although it was fulfilling a profound need, Rissa’s goal was to transform NSR into a sustainable commercial enterprise. At the moment, however, it was beginning to look more and more like a non-profit organization and not a viable business. Further, the practicalities of bringing celebrities to the States, who would inevitably receive only a fraction of the reception that they were accustomed to in Indonesia, was becoming taxing emotionally.

So that’s how I thought, you know what, I’m going to do my own auditions. For American[s]. So that’s how I came up with the idea for *Dangdut in America*, because I thought let me try something with American[s] directly, rather than inviting Indonesian coming, take care of them here and there, and still not knowing where to go. I said, forget it. I’m going to do stuff with American[s].

By January 2007, ads were already appearing in Philadelphia's local weeklies as well as on MySpace. "Become famous in Indonesia," they read, inviting readers to attend *DIA*'s auditions.

At that time, I was enrolled in a service-learning course as a third-year undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania. I had never heard of dangdut. The seminar, titled *Exploring Local Memories and Traditions*, was co-taught by the director of the university's now-extinct Center for Folklore and Ethnography, Mary Hufford, and anthropologist Yoonhee Kang, a visiting scholar who had done her doctoral fieldwork in Indonesia. The idea was to work with burgeoning immigrant communities in Philadelphia to, on the one hand, introduce ethnographic principles to the students and, on the other, utilize those tools as means for community service.<sup>11</sup> In previous years, the course worked with individuals from the Liberian community in West Philadelphia. This time, however, we began working with representatives from the new and quickly expanding Indonesian community in South Philadelphia. It was from speaking with a number of community leaders—storeowners and their clients, a pastor at an Indonesian church, an Indonesian journalist—that the class got wind of Rissa's upcoming auditions. *Dangdut in America* was buzzing in the community.

On a sunny and bitter Friday afternoon in February, my classmates and I approached a cement-brick community center in South Philadelphia to attend *DIA*'s first day of auditions. Though we came intending merely to observe the sessions, when we

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<sup>11</sup> Since having been introduced to Rissa and *DIA* over two years ago, I have finished my B.A. and am currently completing my M.A. in Anthropology. In a Rubin version of reflexivity, I might recount, à la Allaine Cerwonka (Cerwonka & Malkki 2007), the various theoretical threads that I explored in parallel with the developments in Rissa's project. And though this might be an enlightening project for studies of ethnographies—that is, to map my intellectual achievements and training, and consider how various syllabi have influenced my perspective on Rissa's project—it is beyond the scope of the present essay. Suffice it to say that, in retrospect, my perspective has undergone a number of changes, if not false starts, in numerous directions. At times, it was pulled along a particular theoretical strand by a specific reading or discussion in class; at other points in my research, my perspective changed in response to one of Rissa's comments. Such shifts are, I believe, typical of any ethnographic endeavor, whether one is doing research while enrolled in classes or not.



entered the building we were swarmed with cameramen and the large black eyes of their bulky video cameras. No amount of explaining could convince Rissa and the film crew that we were there to observe and not audition. Though I was too timid to try out, they were able to talk a classmate of mine into auditioning.

The community center's basketball-court-turned-soundstage had poor acoustics. Voices and footsteps echoed between the cement walls, which were decorated with streamers and other party decorations. A makeshift stage was set in front of shiny silver curtains facing the judges' red table. There sat Toni—a Philadelphia native who functioned as Rissa's primary coordinator—and Rissa, the two judges, as they presided over the world of *DIA*, looking sternly at my classmate, Yuki, as he gave it a shot.

That first day of auditions was sparsely attended. A few people trickled in now and again, but in general the observers outnumbered the observed. To audition, one signed up on a list out in the hall and was then invited to enter the main room where the basketball court/audition stage was. The contestant would then be asked to sing a song of his or her choice and to read aloud the lyrics to a famous dangdut song. Ideally, the auditioning party would be your 'average American,' stumbling awkwardly through the first stanza, mispronouncing even the simplest of Indonesian words. The final task was to dance along with a recorded dangdut track, a task not easy for anyone unfamiliar with the music. Dangdut's highly syncopated rhythms proved difficult for even the most suave of the contestants.



*Figure 3, Rissa and Toni, the Dangdut in America judges (courtesy NSR Productions 2008).*



*Figure 4, Interviewing a contestant at the DIA auditions (courtesy NSR Productions 2008).*

The sessions that followed were better attended. Many Indonesians from South Philadelphia came out, but Rissa sought American contestants, specifically those that struck a balance between talent and American-ness. Or at least that was what I had anticipated. Instead, the three finalists that were ultimately selected were more like an emblem of global sociality. There was Yuki, my classmate, an exchange student from Japan studying in Philadelphia for only one year; Chris (female), a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Norwegian-born and Australia-educated psychologist who works in Philadelphia and moonlights as a rock singer; and finally, there was John "JLS," an 18 year-old African-American gospel singer from East Falls, Philadelphia. Together, the three were a portrait of multiculturalism.

Following the auditions, Mary, the course's instructor, arranged for Rissa a practice space on the University of Pennsylvania's campus. Every Sunday throughout the following month a film crew arrived at the Center for Folklore and Ethnography to set up in preparation for filming. Stage lights were brought in and mounted along detailed wood trimmings that made visible the University's construction of tradition. A PA system was set up in front of an Ivy League fireplace and bulky speakers sat teetering on their tripod stands. During these rehearsal sessions, the finalists practiced their singing and dancing, assisted by vocal tutors and choreographers. Not only were they learning how to sing with the correct dangdut inflections; they were also required to sing in a foreign syllabic system, that of *bahasa Indonesia*. In the Center's basement, a mix of American and Indonesian back-up dancers choreographed their moves to the songs that would eventually be performed by the finalists. The band, comprised of a motley mix of local jazz and rock players, attempted to pin down dangdut's evidently evasive sound.

Like *Akademi Fantasi* (the show from which *Dreams Come True* 'spun off'), and upon which Rissa based *DIA*, these rehearsal sessions would eventually comprise the

bulk of the television series—and they were always fun to attend. Along with the necessary practicing, the rehearsals were catered by Rissa's friends and family. Overflowing trays of traditional Indonesian cuisine lined the tables. Americans ate Indonesian food side-by-side with Indonesians, dramatized as if they were betraying for the first time an invisible line of apartheid. Outside of the rehearsals, Rissa took the finalists and a small film crew on outings: typical American activities. These were less lavish than the activities in *Dreams Come True*, but were nonetheless supposed to impart for the Indonesian audience a sense of wholesome goodness and intercultural exchange.



Figure 5, John "JLS" instructed in the niceties of Indonesian cuisine (courtesy NSR Productions 2008).

During the practices, which spanned a month, the cameramen hovered above and around the contestants, following their every move and constantly prompting them to address the camera. Particular events cued reflexivity. Eating, for instance, was always a time when the self-consciously and explicitly multi-cultural group—the crew, the producers, the judges, the contestants, etc.—reflected on their mutual appreciation of

Indonesian culture as evidenced by their participation in the ritual of 'ethnic food' tasting. The consumption of Indonesian food made palpable the crossing of cultural lines, a sacrament of intercultural contact. Meals were eaten standing up, and, when the cameras were on, the women who had prepared the impressive spreads recalled how they learned to make the dish, what was in it, why it was traditional, etc. These moments were captured on film and displayed prominently the inclusion of the film crew. Cameras and lights were often in the frame. It was spontaneous by design.

Meanwhile, following Mary's advice, I was attending these rehearsals intent on producing a mini-documentary about the production of the show and was thus often seen trailing Rissa or one of the contestants along alongside the hired cameramen. Since Rissa was producing *Dangdut in America* independently, without any fiscal or formal support, she often reflected on how difficult the production process was. On one of the last Sunday practices, I sat talking with her, as well as with Toni, her co-judge, and Mary. Rissa was reflecting on how much work had gone into the show, and so I began filming. Without my being prepared for it, Rissa began to cry. Mary shot me a quick look that I interpreted as "Stop recording!"—which I did. Only later did I realize that the look she intended was "Oh my, she's crying! What do I do?" Rissa was upset because she worried that the amount of effort that she was putting into *DIA* would not be adequately reflected in the show's Indonesian reception. I stood there, aside Mary who was, at that point, hugging Rissa to console her. In my fieldnotes, I wrote, "I scratched my head in confusion, looking around to see if anyone could cue me on what to do or how to look, any sign at all." I caught the sight of Rissa's cameraman, who, after seeing my befuddlement, marched over, took the camera out of my hands, turned it on, and started recording. Experienced, he worked his way into the huddle, close to Rissa and Mary's embrace, and filmed, capturing as much as possible. I made a copy of the tape to contribute to the show's footage, though I have yet to see the complete edited

version of the *DIA*'s episodes and don't know whether or not this footage was included. Regardless, this occurs to me now to be a powerful instance of overt, dramatic reflexivity—the kind a Reality cameraman waits patiently to capture. It was also the first time that the meta-narrative—the story of Rissa making *DIA*—was tapped. Being there, the affect was real.

On the whole, the footage that I captured did not differ much from that of the *DIA* camera personnel (except in quality, since they had more expensive cameras). Although the realization that there was no “backstage” for me to document did not bode well for my class project, it later helped me to grasp the reflexive nature of Reality production: The reflexive aesthetic of Reality was always one step ahead of me, predisposed to bring the backstage to the fore. The curtain that I imagined separated the backstage from the foreground was non-existent. Brechtian principles for demonstrating artifice are inverted. In Reality, production becomes product.

At the time, it was strange to think that all of these rehearsals were in preparation for a final competition. The three finalists spent long hours working together and, it seemed, they liked hanging out with each other. As I mentioned above, the contestants spent several Saturdays doing group activities. As in *Dreams Come True*, these were “typical American activities”—though toned down since Rissa was funding *DIA* independently. On one weekend, Rissa took a camera crew and the three on a skiing trip to Liberty Mountain. At other times, they wandered through Philadelphia's Center City, acting goofily and wildly together, shouting the few Indonesian phrases they knew at strangers, and singing dangdut at the top of their lungs in order to freak out the native Philadelphians. Often, they addressed the camera directly, instructed on how to say phrases like “what's up, Indonesia?” Following each activity, the participants were, of course, treated to an Indonesian meal as a way of balancing each “American” activity with an “Indonesian” one.

After the imminent final performance-competition, however, there would be only one winner. There, the finalists would each have the opportunity to perform a small selection of songs with the “all-American band” as well as the mixed Indonesian and American back-up dancers. Though it seemed somewhat strange after weeks of bonding, the competition facet of the show was absolutely necessary since Rissa had intended to render in *DIA* the essence of American “boot-strap” values and meritocracy. In *DIA*’s Reality, it doesn’t matter whom you are, where you came from, or how you got here; all that matters is that you can really sing dangdut—a principle that she had located in other Reality shows.



Figure 6, The three contestants: (From left to right) Yuki, Chris, and John “JLS” (courtesy NSR Productions 2008).

The finale was held in a rented out auditorium in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, approximately one hour from Center City, Philadelphia. Delegates from Indonesia’s American embassy in Washington co-sponsored the event, a recognition which afforded Rissa some comfort, if only briefly. In all, the show went off without a hitch. Yuki,

Chris, and John performed as well as they had during the rehearsals and the “all-American band” reproduced the dangdut sound as accurately as they were able to—though ultimately, their jazz and classic rock musical-habitus shined through. The highlight of the show was John’s impromptu freestyle rap over the song “Puzzle of Love” and the spontaneous dance that accompanied it.<sup>12</sup> In the end, John’s performance prevailed, and he was declared the first winner of *Dangdut in America* competition. In its original conception, Rissa had planned to recycle this model, shooting subsequent seasons of *DIA* in various urban centers throughout the US. After the final performance, however, the task at hand was to pitch the independently-produced show to television networks in Indonesia. If picked up, Rissa would have the capital necessary to continue with production.

### *business and idealism*

In the months following the completion of *DIA*, Rissa flew to Jakarta. By the time that she left, she had already decided to make a documentary to accompany *DIA*. The product that she envisioned was similar to my class project—an extended ‘behind-the-scenes’ look at the production of *Dangdut in America*. I offered Rissa much of the footage I had taken on Mary’s handheld camcorder. This documentary would be a reflexive annex to the official episodes and their rubric. In addition to documentation of the show itself, she wanted to capture her experiences with the television networks, to which she would be pitching *DIA*. This would shift the focus of attention away from the contestants to a significant degree. The documentary, which would also be titled

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<sup>12</sup> During his song, the show’s choreographer came onto the stage and began dancing with John, though the two had never practiced this to my knowledge. At the time, there was a minor buzz circulating amongst Rissa and her friends—though in recollection, I am not sure whether this buzz started independently, or whether it was provoked by my Professor, Mary’s, questions about the dance’s supposed promiscuity. Since Rissa was trying to promote dangdut in contrast with the image fostered by Inul and the new generation of dangdut, dancing of this sort was potentially dangerous. When asked about it later, however, Rissa brushed it off by redirecting attention to John’s talent as a singer, since that was what it was really all about.



*Dangdut in America*, was meant to capture the show's ability to bridge cultures from a more "etic" perspective than the show itself, thereby securing the value inherent in the project through the appropriation of documentary's objective aesthetic. The reflexive style that generates Reality gave way, in this instance, to reflexive content presented through documentary's straightforward narrative aesthetic.

To supplement the meetings with television network executives that she had planned to film, Rissa would show a rough cut of *DIA*'s pilot episode to random citizens on the streets of Jakarta and film their unscripted and unrehearsed reactions. In effect, she would be conducting and documenting informal focus groups in order to gather proof that the average Indonesian on the streets of Jakarta appreciated *DIA*. The desired effect was not merely approval as such, but sheer surprise—or better, 'culture shock'—at the sight of Americans singing dangdut. The documentary was completed and has since aired on MHz Networks, an Internet and cable television network that specializes in "international programming" and is intended to represent a global audience (see [www.mhznetworks.org](http://www.mhznetworks.org)).

Although she may have anticipated some setbacks in getting the show on television, Rissa was unprepared for the level of rejection that she received in Jakarta. Network after network was uninterested. Even the few executives that claimed to like the show personally decided eventually it wasn't what the network was looking for at the moment. One or two networks did, in the end, express some favorable interest in *DIA*, but they required Rissa to have already signed with a sponsor—what she perceived to be a paradox: "How will people know if your stuff is good if there's nobody gonna help me to promote it?"

*DIA* was doing something that had never done before, she claimed. Americans who travel through Indonesia might come across dangdut coincidentally, and surely after living there, many expatriate Americans have acquired a good sense of the music's

ubiquity. But aside from your ethnomusicologists or your occasional seasoned traveler, Americans familiar with dangdut are few and far between. Rissa saw *Dangdut in America* as living proof that the music had potential for popularity *in America*, not just in Indonesia. And the fact that none of the television networks were willing to go out on a limb for the program—or, didn't "have the guts" to do so—proved something to Rissa about the darker side of Indonesian identity:

R: Man, when people say that business is cruel—Business—is—cruel. You know? I wish that in Indonesia, you could do both idealism and business, but it seems like there, it's straight to business. Where I'm coming from is more kind of like idealism, you know, because I feel like I want to do something for my *country*, and yet I wanted to have the commercial part too. That's where I'm having trouble, because in Indonesia, it's straight to business. They don't care about their own culture, you know? [...] And that's where I think in America it's different, you know. When you have your value in America—even if you don't have anything—but if you do a good job, people can climb up, where in Indonesia, it's like "Who are you? What do you do? What makes you think you're good? Why should we invest in you?"

A: So why do you think that is?

R: I don't know, it's just their nature, I think.

A: Come on, no. That's not it [smiling].

R: I don't know [laughing], it's—it's already there. It's in their blood [laughing].

A: Well then do you think what you're doing can change that?

R: I'm hoping, yes [sincerely].

A: Because you want to kind of expose that, [am I getting this] right?

R: Yeah, uh huh. Because I think I was kind of like sad, because I think somebody gotta have *the guts* to do it. Because like, I'm doing it, I have the guts to do it, because I know it's something for *my* country, and it's something good and we can work together. Between Indonesia and United States. But in Indonesia, suddenly, nobody cares. *So many rich people*. They don't have to say—they don't have to give a lot, just attention. And pay attention! You know? Because that's already *value* to me.

Though Rissa believed that *DIA* had so much innate potential, the Indonesian mass media's market ideologies left little room for her idealism. In America, she hints, it is possible to accrue value as long as one does a good job and works hard. And this was exactly what she believed she had done and exactly what she believed the contestants to have done in the show, proving that America was ready for its "dangdut revolution." Nonetheless, the value inherent in the show was trumped by the networks' market logic, which is bent to destroy all other systems of value—the totalizing system of neoliberal doxa (see Graeber 2001; Bourdieu 1977, 1998b). Even though all she sought in return was appreciation and attention, Rissa's proposition was refused.

### *the value of Dangdut in America*

In his exegesis on 'value,' David Graeber (2001) notes three stereotypic models to which the term is linked.

1. "values" in the **sociological** sense: conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life [e.g., Durkheim]
2. "value" in the **economic** sense: the degree to which objects are desired, particularly, as measured by how much others are willing to give up to get them
3. "value" in the **linguistic** sense, which goes back to the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), and might be most simply glossed as "meaningful difference" [Graeber 2001: 2].

It is important to note that each one of these models of value is always already linked implicitly to "some larger, social totality—even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor's imagination" (2001: xii). While Graeber's intention is to point to the way that value has been construed across historically constituted academic disciplines, I would contend that these models or stereotypes of usage have leaked outside the academy, as evidenced by Rissa's usage. *DIA*, she would argue, is valuable according to each one of these criterial models.

In the sociological sense, the show is made to transform dangdut's *desirability* within globalizing regimes of multiculturalism (Barry 2001; Rapport 2003). The portrayal of a Reality wherein Americans are genuinely interested in Indonesian culture (*qua* dangdut, of course) imbues the music with new value through their performed desire. Against the backdrop of Indonesia's postcolonial history, an American desire for Indonesian pop culture counters the implicit but rampant symbolic violence related to foreign media's hegemonic status and cosmopolitan connotations, especially for Indonesia's youth and the burgeoning middle class (cf. Smith-Hefner 2007). In *Dangdut in America*, Americans obsess over dangdut while Indonesians are the harbingers of the object of their desire, their tutors and coaches. A similar, but somewhat inverted, effect is at work in *Dreams Come True*: the Indonesian participants worked with volunteer organizations to assist Americans in need, reversing the symbolic violence born of the regularity of Western aid workers in Indonesia. Value is acquired by taking the hierarchies of post-coloniality and flipping them, so that the natives are now the teachers of culture (in *DIA*) and the colonizers now the receivers of aid (in *Dreams Come True*).

In the economic sense of 'value,' *DIA* functions to imbue both dangdut and itself with value by reflexively depicting the "hard work" and "labor" that went into the show's production. The contestants were willing to struggle, to labor, in order to perfect dangdut; Rissa struggled to produce the show, financially and emotionally. And, importantly, this labor—and the success of the show—ultimately depended on cooperation across lines of cultural difference. This is manifest in those reflexive moments, when participants discuss how hard they have been working, or Rissa expresses how taxing her labor is becoming. Accordingly, the show's value *should*, Rissa argues, be self-evident. However, the fact that the network executives lack "the guts" to try something new by putting *DIA* on the air makes evident their misrecognition of this value.

Since value is always linked to an imagined social order or totality, it is clear that Rissa and the middle class network executives are enlisted into two entirely different cultural economies—across which value does not flow untaxed. The imagined economy within which *DIA* was seen to have accrued value is, as it always is, highly motivated by a parallel moral economy. Typical of American middle class values, this moral economy links value to hard work, self-sacrifice, and talent—regardless of social standing, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, nationality, sexuality, etc., and is based on a classless ideology. “When you have your value in America—even if you don’t have anything—but if you do a good job, people can climb up...” Whereas for the networks, there was no obvious correspondence between the labor performed within and by the show and its accumulation of value, the ties between genuine investiture/effort and value seem, to Rissa, self-evident. With her transnational perspective, Rissa made the conclusion that there must be something caught between the labor and the value, something disrupting the natural accumulation of value: rigid social hierarchy. In the States, Rissa perceives, this is not a problem. Everyone imagines that they belong to the middle class (see *Box 3* below). The moral economy of value in Indonesia, instead of following its natural route, reproduces its rigid social hierarchy. “In Indonesia, it’s like ‘Who are you? What do you do? What makes you think you’re good? Why should we invest in you?’”—all this *after* the network executives had viewed *DIA*, televisual “proof” of its worthiness and value. Only later did Rissa realize this apparently systemic mismatch between the imagined economy with which she was engaging and that imagined by the Indonesian network executives.

***Box 3: The Myth of the Middle Class***

Sherry Ortner (1991, 1998) has commented on an ideological trend within America, wherein “the middle class” is over-determined to the extent that class differences are minimized to an alarming degree. This is often called “the myth of the middle class,” or some such name that makes evident the myth’s ideological and distorting capacities. According to analyses of the myth, identity markers such as race, gender, and ethnicity come to stand in for what are more

accurately and traditionally described class-based differences. However, as Stuart Hall (2002) has argued, these categories of identity (class included) are best understood as *articulated through* each other, such that they are intimately co-related. What Ortner is referring to is an all-encompassing, unmarked category into which every American who is not homeless or a movie star fits. This effect, she argues, is partly a consequence of the “identity” discourses in the public sphere in the 1990s: “it is precisely in the internalization and naturalization of public discourses about ‘identities’ that the fusion of class with race and ethnicity happens in American cultural practice” (1998: 14).

The emergence of identity politics discourse in the 1990s is part of a larger trend. Since the 1970s, argues Graeber (2001), the Left has retreated to the academy and engaged in de-politicized filibusters. In an age when the public sphere was dominated by the rhetoric of “globalization,” “identity” was not only a red herring for what was often more accurately described as structural inequality, but its discourse was quickly appropriated by corporate advertising, turning the emblems of cultural diversity into totems of individual desire and desirability (Frank 1997). The myth of the middle class is a homogenizing force that, as an impetus for Reality TV, highlights *cultural* difference (through, for example, identity politics) but, in its surmountability, promotes *social* similitude as a morally motivated value.

Within the show itself, *DIA* responds to the disparities born of a global cultural industry. Like the example of welfare offered in the final pages of Mauss’ *The Gift* (2000 [1954]: 65-83), Rissa imagines that the monologic influx of American and Western media in Indonesia creates a vacuum of reciprocity—and thus a relation of power inequality—between the two countries (see also Bourdieu 2000: 191). In light of this, *DIA* “stages”<sup>13</sup> this nonexistent reciprocity by depicting American interest and cultural investment in dangdut, and pointing to an appreciation of Indonesian culture more broadly. The intended effect is a reversal of what seemed to be a one-way neoliberal conversation: American media/culture comes in, but Indonesian media/culture does not go out. And while this performance of reciprocity might be criticized as a mere simulation of any value attribution to Indonesian cultural aesthetics, it is constantly validated and valorized by its claims to Reality. The intended result is the generation of something

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<sup>13</sup> On the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Folklore and Ethnography website, Professors Yoonhee Kang and Mary Hufford, the co-teachers for the course I was enrolled in, wrote a brief overview of *Dangdut in America*, in which she referred to the Americans’ performance as “staging reciprocity” (<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/center/DangdutinAmerica.html>).

like a national pop-cultural self-esteem on the part of the Indonesian middle class—exactly those who criticized and rejected Rissa when trying to get the show on air. This effort, she believes, is clearly a form of empowerment, a way “to make your own country better.” No one should be ashamed of their Indonesian identity, especially in a Reality where Americans think dangdut is cool.

Finally, in the Saussurean/structural sense of “value,” *DIA* is meant to stand out as a ‘meaningfully different’ Reality program vis-à-vis its Indonesian Reality counterparts. Rissa found that the proof of the show’s distinction was made palpable in the footage of average Indonesians’ reactions to the pilot episode, namely, their utter and pleasant disbelief at the sight of Americans singing dangdut. Even after seeing this footage, however, the networks were still uninterested. Rather than being valued for its relative distinction, Rissa proposed that it was exactly *DIA*’s “difference” that, in the end, detracted from its desirability to the networks. Yet, I wondered whether or not this difference was what made it undesirable, or whether it was dangdut’s prominence in the show and the *kampung* connotations it retained with the network officials:

**A:** Do you think that they didn't want to invest in anything *new*, or they didn't want to invest in anything *old* because it was dangdut? You know?

**R:** I think part of it is because of dangdut. Because they look at dangdut music like, you know, it's for lower class, you know? Even though now dangdut is just starting to go middle and up, but I think it's just a confusion between the dance move, you know, the young generation, and the senior generation. So I would agree with the senior generation, like Rhoma Irama, Camelia Malik, and all that.

The difference that Rissa hints at here is that between the young generation and its association with sex, glamour, and money versus the older generation that connotes, for the middle classes, rural life and populist values. What I came to realize later is that my question was somewhat moot: *DIA* was novel and distinct in its linking dangdut with American culture, but it was not “new” in the ways that the network executives expected—that is, it did not conform to the conventions of the younger generation.

While these were young and hip American kids performing dangdut, they were not, like Inul, exploiting an over-the-top sex appeal. Rather, Rissa was explicitly trying to invoke classic dangdut for her revitalization project. The result, *Dangdut in America*, must have seemed to the networks paradoxical, imbuing the *kampung* with a cosmopolitan ethos.

This paradox is also closely related to what Rissa perceives to be Indonesia's misrecognition of the United States and its culture, due equally to the nature of American media and the New Order censorship policies. This simulacrum of an overly wild America becomes fused with dangdut's stratification across a generational divide: The "young generation" of dangdut performers are known, along with their middle class fan-base, to associate themselves with an image of America as an emblem of cosmopolitan identity (Smith-Hefner 2007), while the "senior generation" is more closely tied to the egalitarian meta-messages that Rissa intends to spread through *DIA*. The result is two different dangduts—the old and the young—and two different Americas—that imagined by Rissa and portrayed in *DIA*, and that imagined by the network representatives. Rissa betrays the (pop-)cultural logic that attempts delimit what dangdut can be and what America is, and how they can relate to each other. For the middle-class television network executives, *Dangdut in America* was un-categorizable within the imagined social totality through which its worth is articulated and thus had no "value."

### *celebrity making, from scratch*

While Rissa had a hard time dealing with these rejections from Indonesia's national television networks in Jakarta, she was reassured by the support of Rhoma Irama, whom she had the opportunity to meet at a press conference held for *DIA* on 24 May 2007. At this time though, getting Irama's support for the project was little more than kind words. On the other hand, Rissa continued to receive excited and positive reactions



from individuals on the streets of Jakarta, who caught their first glimpse of the *DIA* pilot on a laptop computer. In retrospect, these informal focus-group-like sessions gave her the motivation to continue with the project.

I thought, you know what? I know that 99% of the people I met—they loved the idea. The business is dead, since there is nobody want to invest in anything new. So I thought, you know what? Forget about it. I'm not going to worry about that, but I know this is something good for Indonesia. So I thought, you know what? I'm going to do now recording.

Before returning to the States, Rissa bought the rights to several dangdut songs from PAMMI, the Indonesian dangdut musicians' guild. Once back in Delaware, she began scouting again for new vocal talent. After recruiting a number of individuals to start working with her on a *Dangdut in America* album, she found that mobilizing the production process was much more difficult than it had been for the filming of *DIA*, namely, because her financial investment in these projects had yielded miniscule (if any) return.<sup>14</sup> She entered a down period. Many of those that she recruited started doubting her since not much was happening; they became less and less interested in both dangdut and Rissa's project. Others had major life events happen in the meantime, closing what turned out to be a shorter window of opportunity than was expected. Chris, the female finalist on the show, for instance, became pregnant while Yuki, my classmate finalist on the show, returned to Japan for his final year of college. With few other options, Rissa continued to invest in John JLS, the winner of *Dangdut in America*, as her star performer.

In June 2007, John performed a hybridized version of dangdut at Philadelphia's annual Asian Festival—an arts festival held at an outdoor venue along the Delaware River. In the Fall of that year, Rissa and I met John at his house in East Falls to film a

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<sup>14</sup> I was reluctant to discuss with Rissa the financial side of her investment in these projects and ultimately refrained from doing so. While she admitted that she was spending and spending and not making anything back—and that this was becoming problematic with her husband—I felt uncomfortable pressing for any further detail *because* she made it clear that she was not doing well. At the time, I was concerned that questions about the fiscal side might be inappropriate and jeopardize our rapport.

music video for an English-language cover of the famous dangdut song, “Puzzle of Love,” which he had yet to finish recording. It was a hot afternoon, sunny and humid, and we spent most of it on John’s neighbor’s roof, capturing him lip-synch and dance to the song in the Autumn sunlight. There was little preparation, so we improvised each scene as we went along—sketching as we went a loose plot revolving around a fictional would-be girlfriend. While I wouldn’t say that it was unprofessional, our lack of preparation clearly shined through.

Later in the year, Rissa had arranged for John to perform at the Indonesian embassy in DC, but at the last moment, John cancelled. Adding to her frustration, I too told her that I could not attend due to school responsibilities. It was too late to find a replacement for John and, because Rissa felt both responsible and embarrassed, she performed the song that John had been preparing by herself, despite having never performed in her life. Shortly afterwards, John called Rissa to tell her that he was no longer able to continue working with her. The news hit her hard on a personal level. She was devastated.

For a while, I lost touch with Rissa. I would call every once in a while to check in and see how she was doing and what she was up to, but she was usually curt and I was busy with school. In late May of 2008, after the school year had ended, she called me to ask for a favor. After filling me in on all the background—she had held new auditions, though this time in private and not filmed, locally, in Delaware, so as to avoid the hassles of filming in a big city like Philadelphia—she asked if I wouldn’t mind filming a party at her house in mid-June.<sup>15</sup> I agreed, and when I arrived at Rissa’s house in Delaware, I was surprised to see Thomas Djorgi (of “Dangdut Mania”, see pp. 20-21) standing outside smoking a cigarette. I chatted with him briefly across a somewhat stark language barrier. When I entered the house and the party, I was formally

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<sup>15</sup> On ethnographic reciprocity and filmmaking, see Jackson 2004.

introduced to Arreal Tilghman, the twenty-two year old from Eastern Shore Maryland who had won Rissa's most recent round of talent auditions.

Arreal's charisma was immediately evident. There he stood, unrehearsed in the nuances of intercultural sociality, unaccompanied in a house full of the Indonesian-American bourgeoisie with a grin on his face charming enough to diminish any trace of cultural awkwardness. In my notes from that day, I wrote, "Arreal is the new face of *Dangdut in America*." He was also extremely amenable to my questions and note taking since it allowed him to momentarily let down his guard and relax into a more comfortable twenty-something persona. I found Rissa, and she explained to me what was going on. Arreal was the new talent; he and Thomas Djorghi had been practicing together over several days in preparation for the coming Asian Festival on the Delaware River, which was only a few days away. The party was for Thomas, who had just had a birthday. And, in a parallel to the rehearsal sessions for *DIA*, Arreal soon found himself amidst mountains of Indonesian cuisine with many eyes focused on him as he navigated the explicitly foreign meal. Again, the consumption of Indonesian food was rendered iconic of experiencing 'Indonesian culture.' Many of the Indonesian guests were happy to instruct him in what he was eating, how it was prepared, and what he might want to avoid—though, of course, he should try it all.

Rissa asked that I tour the party with her digital video camera and interview people, specifically discussing Arreal and his immanent performance. I captured candid moments of dancing, goofy interactions between Arreal and Thomas, and reflexive monologues from Rissa and Arreal about how hard they had been working together. In attendance at the party were dozens of Rissa's friends and family, including three or four men who worked in Washington, DC, for the Indonesian branch of the American radio service, Voice of America. They too conducted interviews with Arreal and

Thomas, who together discussed in both English and Indonesian the difficulties and value of working together across a cultural and linguistic divide.

Two days later, I met Rissa, Arreal, and Thomas at the Philadelphia Asian Festival. Together, Arreal and Thomas had developed quite an entertaining rapport. Each was charismatic in his own way and their ability to communicate well extra-linguistically demonstrated the close bond that they had developed as a result of spending so much time together practicing. After Thomas began his performance—at the beginning of which, the audience rushed the stage—I stood with Arreal as he waited nervously for his cue. When his time came, Arreal, an unfamiliar face to the crowd, joined Thomas on stage for his first dangdut performance. Their on-stage dynamic, while interesting and fun, was ultimately unrefined. Arreal's stage presence was notable less that of a performer than a 'hype-man' for Thomas, rallying the mostly-Asian crowd, reminding and exciting them about the bizarre fact that they were dancing to dangdut... in Philadelphia.<sup>16</sup>



*Figure 7, Arreal and Thomas (left to right) performing at the Philadelphia Asian Festival.*

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<sup>16</sup> While Thomas was performing his classic dangdut hits, a huge crowd formed in front of the stage, dancing to dangdut as they would at a show in Jakarta. Afterward, several people told me that they felt like they were back in Indonesia, especially considering Philadelphia's damp summer heat.

But Rissa wanted more from Arreal. She felt that he wasn't yet ready to become a full-fledged dangdut star in his own right:

R: We ran into trouble because he couldn't sing really good.

A: Arreal? Really?

R: No, he couldn't know—he didn't know how to sing it right, with the *chinka*—with the pitch of dangdut. There are certain pitches that you have to know to sing dangdut. And I wasn't a singer—I'm not a singer—so of course, I said to him—oh my god—what am I gonna say to him? He's like a stranger, you know? He's like “it's easy for you to say, but it's hard for me to know what you talking about!” So I said, you know what? Let's just go to Indonesia. That's how I decided that I need help! I need help big time. So I took him to Indonesia, and I gave him the best teacher that can speak English [Trie Utami, a famous singer in Indonesia], that can communicate with him well.

[...]

A: You know what? As soon as I saw him again, after he returned from your trip [to Indonesia]—because I saw him perform last June, at the Asian Festival, and he didn't really sing much at all. He was just kind of doing—he was just kind of dancing around.

R: Yeah because he wasn't *confident*—

A: Right, and when he came back he was so much better.

R: Yes, he wasn't confident at all. So I see that problem [...] and thought, you know what, this is not gonna work. If I don't take him for real [and show him] what dangdut is all about, I'm gonna lose him like the other[s]. So I thought the only way that people will believe me in what I'm talking about is if I take him to Indonesia.

In the weeks following the Asian Festival, the two flew to Jakarta to start training Arreal in the nuances of dangdut performance. With the help of Trie Utami, Arreal would finish recording the “Dangdut in America” album that he had begun with Rissa in Delaware. In Indonesia, with the help of many seasoned dangduters, Rissa would take Arreal's raw talent and shape him into a Real star.

The two were scheduled to return in August, but by the time September arrived, I still hadn't heard anything from Rissa. Weeks after my semester at the university began, Rissa finally called: She had returned from Indonesia triumphant and was

excited to fill me in. She volunteered to drive to Philadelphia to meet me. After picking me up on campus, we drove to a small coffee shop in the neighborhood where I live. In the car, she began relaying to me how excited she was about the success of the trip.

When the two first arrived, Rissa told me over two cups of tea at the coffee shop, Arreal had a hard time with culture shock, “kind of like not sure what’s going on with people around him.” But, she continued, she was there to constantly remind him that he had to “really fight for this, if he wants it.” It paid off. Once things started to click for Arreal, he started to feel “like [he was] dreaming;” after several television appearances, some of which were accompanied by Thomas Djourghi, the Indonesian press started treating Arreal like a celebrity: Photo-ops, press releases, interviews, autographs, television appearances, nightlife, etc. Note both the correlation and the difference between Arreal’s “dream,” his will to fame, on the one hand, and the “dream” of the *Dreams Come True* participants, which was to visit America. In the state of *celebrity*, as one’s name and image become disembodied and matter-less in circulation, the self becomes a specter, a dream; in the surreal state of *America*, the imagined simulacrum-landscape touches ground all around you, as if you were inhabiting a dream.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 8, *The simulacrum of a celebrity* (courtesy NSR Productions 2008).

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<sup>17</sup> See Jackson 2001 for an analogous analysis of Harlem as an imagined landscape.

Arreal's rapid rise to celebrity within the Indonesian media must be understood with reference to the specificity of *DIA's* "black box" of Reality—namely, that dangdut is in the midst of a procession toward global prominence, toward "going international." The black box, Latour (1987) tells us, "is used by cyberneticians whenever a piece of machinery or a set of commands is too complex. In its place they draw a little black box about which they need to know nothing but its input and output" (2-3). *DIA's* Reality is likewise prefigured by an input/output equation: American contestants + dangdut music = dangdut's popular arrival in America. Prefiguring Arreal's arrival in Indonesia was Rissa's carefully planned PR campaign. The most important facet of Arreal's introduction to the public was not merely his ability to sing, or even his ability to sing dangdut; rather, Arreal was presented to the public as a piece of mounting evidence buttressing dangdut's potential global status and international success. Arreal represents to and through the Indonesian media an alternative Reality, that of a cosmopolitan dangdut and an equivalently valued Indonesian people.

Consider, for instance, the following headlines of newspaper articles about Arreal and Rissa from the Indonesian press: "Dangdut Go International," "Dangdut Music is Being Embraced by the American Public," "Dangdut Music Comes to America," and "Dangdut Goes Global" (cf. "*Dangdut in America* in the Press" 2008). Or, consider the following interaction between Arreal and the hosts of the popular television show *Ceriwis*. In this scene, his first appearance on an Indonesian talk show, Arreal enters the set, a pastiche living room, through an oversized and colorful doorway. As he enters the diegetic world of both the set and the Indonesian pop-cultural imagination, the hosts are confused as to what theme music the house band should play for him. Taking a guess, one of the three hosts suggests hip hop, and the band starts on a beat. Arreal shakes his head, seemingly disappointed. Another host takes a shot, guessing disco this time, and the band begins to play a dance beat. Arreal again shakes his head.

"No, no, no," he says, "*dangdut*," annunciating the word slowly, as if the Indonesian audience had never heard of it before. The hosts act shocked and the band plays a dangdut beat, to which Arreal begins to *joget*, the conventional dance step to dangdut's rhythm. One host hands him a microphone, and Arreal bursts into song in *bahasa Indonesian*. The crowd goes wild as the scene cuts to a commercial message. When they return from the break, the hosts give Arreal a lengthier introduction and offer him a seat.

**Host<sub>1</sub>:** So, do you have any friends here?

**Arreal:** Yes, yes, uh—

**H<sub>1</sub>:** In Indonesia? In Jakarta?

**A:** Yes.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** So are you a real singer—or what?—in America?

**Host<sub>2</sub>:** Dangdut!

**A:** Yes, a dangdut singer.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** A dangdut singer—but in America?

**A:** Yes.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** But, uh, um—is there any dangdut there?

**A:** Yes!

Arreal's entrance into the Indonesian public sphere is not merely as a dangdut singer, but as a conduit of dangdut's potential and a harbinger of an alternate Reality. Yes, dangdut has landed in the States! Arreal, and his ability to sing dangdut, are a testimony to that. His familiarity with dangdut celebrities, and knowledge of dangdut history, only reinforces this truth. Moments after this scene, Arreal declares that his name is "Arreal Tilghman-Irama." Through this joke, he left the audience and the hosts laughing while simultaneously performing his knowledge of dangdut history, indexing and reinforcing the notion that the music has "gone international" and leaving the black box of Rissa's Reality construction sealed shut.



While Arreal spent much of his time recording, performing, and making television appearances, Rissa was able to continue the promotional work that she had begun more than a year before, just after the completion of *DIA*. Once the press began recognizing Arreal's presence and will to fame, as well as Rissa's role in all of this, Rissa was contacted by Jak-TV, a local Jakarta television network that has over a dozen affiliates throughout Indonesia. They were interested in broadcasting *DIA*.<sup>18</sup> And, through either her fortuitous luck or her connections in Indonesia, Rissa had also landed a press release at Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism. But by the time I spoke with her, however, she was ultimately disappointed with how the event had gone. Over coffee, Rissa recalled the story of her dissatisfaction: The Ministry of Tourism had symbolically slighted her by asking her to sit behind Arreal at the event. Such treatment was typical of Indonesians, she complained, who have the tendency to mistreat fellow Indonesians in the presence of Americans, thereby constantly producing miniaturized hierarchies that mimic global inequalities and reproduce the symbolic violence born of those inequalities. "No wonder they [the Indonesians] were colonized," she remarked, as if they have always this propensity to mistreat "their own kind." Thus, even as *DIA* began to receive its due attention and recognition, Rissa maintained a moral distance from what she perceived to be the hierarchical tendencies of Indonesians. Only time would tell if *DIA* could truly transform the rank-based moral system that, she observes, isolates Indonesia in the global pop cultural economy.

### *the field of cultural diplomacy*

After the ordeal with the Ministry of Tourism, Rissa sought an outlet to complain about her unjust treatment. Without knowing where to turn, she approached a friend who worked for the Indonesian Parliament. He advised that Rissa make an appointment to

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<sup>18</sup> As I write this thesis, the show broadcasts every Sunday night at 10pm, a primetime slot.

voice her complaints in front of a special council. She took the opportunity to express herself to the government; perhaps there she would find a sympathetic ear. “Worse come to worse,” she thought, “they’re gonna ignore me—and that’s okay! People ignore me anyway!” So she made the appointment, and was accepted.

So, you know, I was like, “Okay, this is the situation.” I showed them the video, like Yuki, John and all that [*DIA*]. I said, “As you saw, those three people are gone, because it took too long for me to prove it. I wasn’t successful, you know, doing it, in the two countries. Not in Indonesia, not in America! I lost everyone! But *now*, I’m here, I brought another person from United States, and he’s learning dangdut, and I’m about to finish up an album.” I said, “I need someone just, at least, to listen to me. I’m not here begging for you [to] give me money, right away, but at least just to listen to me—to what I’m doing.”

By showing footage from *Dangdut in America*, the television series, Rissa was again attempting to relay the inherent but unrecognized value of her project. The video would verify how much work Rissa had already put into this, how much labor had already gone in. *DIA* was distinct and valuable, especially, she urged, in contrast to the field of Indonesian media and their goals and values. Insofar as they were unable to appreciate this work, the television network executives were made to exemplify a pathological value system. The parliamentary council, however, was clearly appreciative the project’s worth.

Rissa’s plea to the Indonesian parliament was successful, I suggest, only because she appealed to a field quite distinct from that of commercial mass media: the field of cultural diplomacy. By engaging with the State, Rissa entered *DIA* into a different “field” of power (Bourdieu 2000), one that was aligned much more acutely with her project’s agenda. Bourdieu’s concept of the field helps one to grasp both the loose and rigid partitions within the whole of a society’s social sphere. A field may be linked to a professional space, such as the field of science or that of media (Bourdieu 1998a), but the State holds a privileged point of access in its ability to influence all other fields; Bourdieu calls this privilege “meta-capital” (Couldry 2003). Fields are traceable realms of value

attribution -- moral economies running along the interface of economic, social, and cultural capital. Rissa, after presenting the *DIA* project to state officials, inserted herself within a substantially different field from that of the recently privatized media, one that, like the value imagined to be exemplified in and through her project, was oriented to global systems of media and meaning making.

Whereas the field of mainstream, private media concerns itself with the production of cultural capital that is easily translated into economic capital, Rissa reflexively characterizes her project as one that is explicitly disengaged with economic capital. "Cultural dialogue," between the US and Indonesia, is seen to be valuable in and of itself—morally charged as "good" in and of itself. But this value did not appear out of thin air, nor did Rissa invent it; rather, it is part of the dream of the neoliberal State. Cultural dialogue and multiculturalism, aside from being that which morally equate "cultures" that are otherwise characterized by gross global economic disparities as a way of legitimizing free trade agreements and deregulation, is a sketch of a harmonious future. If "cultures" are always morally valued as equivalent, histories of predation can be ignored in the name of a better future. Cultural dialogue takes on its own value within a climate of multiculturalist neoliberal doxa, one seen to be quite distinct from economic value, a moral value. In the cultural climate of neoliberalism, governmentality, the art of governing (Foucault 1991), entails state-sanctioned engagement with the emergent field of "cultural diplomacy."

Guys in the parliament love dangdut, because it's *the music of Indonesian people*... [The head of parliament] was kind of like surprised, and he likes the idea of Americans singing dangdut, and spontaneous, he said, "You know what? I don't know what I'm gonna do with you, but I know right now, I will support you. Keep doing what you're doing, and this is gonna be serious and it's gonna be big impact for Indonesia *and* United States."

Within Indonesia, one can see the differences between the field of cultural diplomacy and that of private media. Whereas in the field of commercial media, popular culture is over-determined as an emblem of identity (the assumption being that media is consumed a means of performing identity), the field of cultural diplomacy in Indonesia has been saturated with overtly *traditional* or *regional* genres—what Boellstorff (2003), in writing about popular culture and Indonesia's *gay* and *lesbi* discursive communities, has called the "ethnolocal" (Boellstorff 2003). Cultural forms such as *wayang* (Javanese shadow puppetry) or *gamelan* (Balinese orchestra) have served as benchmarks of Indonesian identity both abroad and domestically for tourists; colleges and university music departments, for example, will often sponsor gamelan orchestras. But within Indonesia, these forms are parsed through national mass media outlets, pointing to a society-internal economy of reified and isolatable cultures, a hierarchy that can only run against the foundations of the dream of multiculturalism. So while the two fields seem to join forces to reify cultural forms as emblematic—totemic, even—of "a culture," the field of cultural diplomacy enters them into a global arena as an equivalently-valued cultural representative.

Dangdut has the paradoxical capacity to straddle the national/ethnolocal divide (cf. Frederick 1982; Wallach 2002, 2008; Weintraub 2008a, 2008b). With its *kampung* connotations, dangdut is indexically tied to the regional and the local—the definitively anti-cosmopolitan, that which is backward, unworldly. But because of its history, having emerged along with the nation's first national media outlets, it retains its capacity to conjure a national public. Of course, depending on who is doing the interpreting, dangdut could go either way. The commercial media, concerned with translating cultural production into economic capital, seek by and large to divorce themselves from what they see to be an anti-cosmopolitan and unprofitable dangdut—and hence Rissa's frustration. *DIA* works past this: Dangdut, having already landed in

America, is forced into a new status; a distinct cosmopolitan value is forged when dangdut is believed to have “gone international.” Those navigating the field of cultural diplomacy can register this easily, for it is exactly what they deal in. Dangdut can be made to serve not merely as an emblem of a united national identity within Indonesia, for that has persistently been a political project.<sup>19</sup> Cultural diplomacy can transform dangdut, like wayang or gamelan, into a traveling representative of Indonesia’s cultural value. As a result, Rissa postures, the cosmopolitan sociality associated with Indonesia’s urban middle classes (Smith-Hefner 2007) can trickle down Indonesia’s rigid social hierarchies, creating a system of morally-driven value that has little or no regard to economic standing.

Soon after the Parliamentary hearing where Rissa pleaded for the support of the government, she was contacted by Jaya Suprana, an Indonesian renaissance man and the head of the Indonesian Museum of Records (MURI). He wished to present Rissa and Arreal with an award of recognition. “So that was like, *finally*, thank god. In Indonesia someone [is] really real—not commercially—but they *value* what their culture is.” Rissa and Arreal extended their trip in order to attend the award ceremony, where they were recognized for introducing dangdut to America and for their contribution to dangdut history. The officiousness of the proceedings, held at the house of the head of Indonesian parliament, reflected the state’s investment in Rissa’s almost revolutionary contribution to the field of cultural diplomacy: dangdut—and in America, no less.

### *the sexual politics of restraint*

As we finished catching up on that Autumn day at the coffee shop near my house, Rissa informed me that the following Monday, 13 October, Arreal would be performing at the Indonesian ambassador’s house in Washington, DC. Rissa explained that a professor of

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<sup>19</sup> Weintraub, personal communication: 30 November 2008.

ethnomusicology at the University of Pittsburgh, Andrew Weintraub, had invited Rhoma Irama and his band, Soneta, to the States to do a mini-tour, visiting Pittsburgh and DC. In Pittsburgh, Irama gave a lecture at an interdisciplinary conference titled “Islam and Popular Culture in Malaysia and Indonesia,” and held a public concert during which the Soneta group performed alongside the Dangdut Cowboys, Weintraub’s all-American dangdut band; in DC, Irama was scheduled to perform at the Ambassador’s home and had contacted Rissa to invite Arreal to perform with him. Rissa then invited me to tag along and film the concert.

The afternoon of the show, I arrived at Rissa’s house to meet her before driving down to DC. There, I chatted with her two friends, Entin and Yuni, who I had met previously first at the *DIA* rehearsal sessions and later at the party for Thomas Djorgi, while waiting for Rissa to get ready. With Entin and Yuni, as well as Rissa’s teenaged daughter, I watched Arreal’s most recently completed music video, which was infinitely more professional in appearance than was the video recorded with John of *DIA*. Set on a green concrete basketball court, Arreal was surrounded by scantily clad backup dancers. Entin and Yuni, who, like Rissa, grew up in Jakarta and now live an upper-middle class lifestyle in Wilmington’s sprawling suburban development communities, commented on the explicitness of the dancers’ dress. It was good to hear their opinions, since they sometimes differed drastically from Rissa’s. In Indonesia, they said, the video’s dancing would be very scandalous.

When I later brought up the issue of Arreal’s illicit back-up dancers with Rissa, she emphasized in defense of Arreal that despite the sexuality of the women in the video, there was a distinct difference between his message and the overly illicit images emanating from the younger generation of dangdut performers. Whereas with stars like Inul, the problem was that the singer was valued not for his or her voice (and it was usually a ‘her’), but rather for her appearance. As the performer, Arreal was *not* overly

sexual and, while the video certainly highlighted explicit dancing, he was qualified because of his vocal talent and hard work. The value, Rissa continued, was always found with the singer and their decisions.

The flimsiness of Rissa's argument, though I did not challenge her on it, led me to consider the tense dynamic at hand. Rissa had made clear to me on several occasions that to launch his career, Arreal would perform classic dangdut songs (or new ones that were classic-sounding). The "real value," she stressed, was to be found in the old dangdut, from a time when Rhoma Irama was at the helm of Indonesia's pop culture. Rhoma, to be sure, championed an egalitarian message, but also a culturally conservative one. During Inulmania, for instance, he protested Inul and called for a boycott of her performances because of her illicit dancing and explicit sexuality. There were even rumors of a fatwa against her that Rhoma had supported (Weintraub 2008a: 381).

Irama's conservatism reflects the sexual dynamics characteristic of the old dangdut, even before its mass media explosion. In seedy urban nightclubs, dangdut was performed mostly by female singers and attended primarily by men. Wallach (2002) describes the typical dynamic of restraint characteristic of performer/audience interactions. Men would offer money to the female singers "to bring a release of built-up (sexual) tension between the singer, the audience member, and the onlookers... [This] can also exhibit men's self control and power, and for the audience is almost a cathartic event, since it signifies the giver's intention to refrain from embracing or otherwise initiating physical contact with the singer, despite her charms as a temptress" (300). Rhoma, as a performer and public figure, was a powerful and patriarchal, an exemplar par excellence of culturally appropriate sexual etiquette. He embodied masculine restraint. Of interest, then, is the fact that Rissa seeks to reproduce Rhoma's apparent *machismo* in a novel cosmopolitan form.

The juxtaposition of Rhoma's conservative sexual politics and cosmopolitanism here seems terse and contradictory. And it is. In fact, it can only be parsed with reference to Rissa's observations of Indonesia's misperceptions of the US, what I called earlier 'the simulacrum of wild America.' Indonesian conceptions of the US serve to justify instances of explicit sexuality, an imagined cosmopolitanism built on a seemingly graceful *lack* of restraint. Rissa, able to travel between and across cultural worlds, recognizes the ultimate misanthropy of a worldview built on unrestraint and failure of such a perception. Media representations of a dream world, like America, where "anything goes," are problematic for a burgeoning middle class. Not only is it *not* how America actually is, but a cosmopolitanism built on unrestraint will only reproduce the social divisions that Rissa perceives as endemic to Indonesian culture. Restraint, exemplified by the voluntarism of the Real America, is productive of sociality and solidarity—it keeps social mobility in check and creates a smooth moral economy. Traditional dangdut's sexual politics of restraint offer an alternative to Wild America and the new dangdut—a cathartic substitute to a malicious cosmopolitanism.

*in the house of cultural diplomacy*

After Rissa was finished preparing for the evening's events, she and I packed up the car, and we departed along with Entin and Yuni. We were heading to the Ambassador's house in Washington, D.C., where Rhoma Irama would be performing—and Arreal would join him. Arreal had been filming another music video that day, and we drove to a Burger King near his shooting location where we would pick him up. Accompanying him was Kristen, the actress from the video and prospective *DIA* talent.

Upon arrival in D.C., when we found the Ambassador's home, there were two gentlemen, either guarding the entrance gate and/or welcoming guests. They pointed us up the winding, torch lit driveway toward the mansion. We parked in a parking lot,



from which we had a vantage of the pristine property and home. The dining room of the house—equipped with a stage—had, for the night’s events, been converted into a nightclub, and was packed with a mostly Indonesian audience. The mass of fans was thick for thirty yards from the stage. All of the lights were off, with the exception of the blue, green, and red that flooded Irama and his band, the Soneta Group, which sprawled across the ten-yard wide stage. We split up: Arreal and Rissa went up front to catch Irama’s eye and let him know that we had arrived, and Entin, Yuni, and I went to the back of the crowd to film and photograph the set. Two or three songs after our arrival, Rhoma called Arreal onto the stage. With the backing of Rhoma and the Soneta group, Arreal demonstrated his worth as a dangdut performer, singing flawlessly in Indonesian.



*Figure 9, Kristen and Arreal, performing with famous Rhoma Irama.*

When the set was over, Rissa got word that Irama had invited us down to his dressing room. Rissa instructed me to start filming as we pushed through the crowd.

Videotape rolling, we weaved our way in and through the small but formidable mass, past the security guards, and down the stairs. Once in Irama's dressing room, I witnessed firsthand Arreal's celebrity charm. I was shocked to see that everyone in the room knew who he was from his appearances on Indonesian television that he made on his trip to Indonesia with Rissa. Everyone took the opportunity to take a photograph of or with him.

While everyone gathered in the room stood in an arc, chatting over a table piled with Indonesian cuisine, Irama made a brief appearance before retreating into a private quarters. In contrast with Thomas Djorghi's party at Rissa's house in June 2008, Arreal was now well acquainted with Indonesian food. He commented on what he liked and what was too spicy. He helped Kristen, who had never had Indonesian food, during her sensuous culinary initiation rite of introduction to Indonesian culture. With confidence, Arreal mingled and, with confidence and sly smile, recalled the few *bahasa* phrases that he had picked up. Meanwhile, I hovered through the crowded dressing room with Rissa's video camera, collecting for her individual responses to Arreal's performance. "He was great," they'd say. "Everything sounded so like *real* dangdut."

Rissa had decided to stay the night in D.C., in guest quarters at the Ambassador's house. She and Arreal would spend the following day with Irama. Before I left to drive Entin, Yuni, and Kristen home in Rissa's SUV, she gave me some more news. She had arranged to hold another party at the Ambassador's house the following month, this time in celebration of Arreal's newly completed and fully mastered album, appropriately titled *Dangdut in America*.

The fourth of November 2008 was a momentous day in the US, the day that Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. It was also the night that Rissa had scheduled the party. I reminded her of this, as did many other people, and the event was pushed back until the following day. When I returned to the

Ambassador's house on 5 November, Arreal was outside getting some things out of Rissa's car in the parking lot. We exchanged stories from the night before—what we did to celebrate. When I entered, I greeted Rissa and helped her set up two projection screens on the stage. As a backdrop for Arreal's performance, she wanted to show Arreal's music videos. The stage, though in the same dining room where Irama had performed, was completely transformed from the dangdut concert hall that it had been three weeks prior. Round tables, which seated eight to ten, extended along the length of the dining room. Two separate magnificent buffet spreads were being prepared on either side of the room. The event, which would be attended by a diplomatic delegation from Indonesia's parliament that were touring the US, was more formal than I had expected.

As we rushed to get the stage set up and the cameras positioned to film the performance, Rissa was excited about the attendance of now former-US Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, Goli Ameri; she would be the evening's guest of honor. Further, in addition to the cadres of prominent guests that were beginning to arrive, Rissa's friends from Voice of America were there to do a special piece on Arreal's album. Throughout the night, the radio reporters conducted several interviews with both Arreal and Rissa, who, like most Obama supporters that day, were excited to talk about his victory. Rissa was especially eager to reflect on the simultaneity of two histories being made at the same time—the first African-American president and the first African-American dangdut singer. Not only was America ready for political change, she insisted, but America was ready for its long awaited "dangdut revolution." During Arreal's interviews, the Voice of America reporters were more interrogational: "How can you *really* be a star [in Indonesia] if you don't speak the language?" He deflected these questions by announcing that he and Rissa were going

back to Indonesia to continue learning about Indonesian culture and dangdut; they would also, of course, be promoting the album.

After their interviews, Arreal and his friend who had come to the event with him disappeared into the dressing room that Irama had occupied just weeks before. Handing me a camera, Rissa asked if I would go film Arreal and his friend goofing around, acting candidly. However, when I got into the dressing room, it was obvious that Arreal was not in the mood to be filmed. Asking if he preferred that I gave them privacy, he told me no, and to stay, but not to film. As he prepared for his performance doing a few vocal exercises, I discussed with him the nature of being in the spot light. He explained that it was not the bracketed moments of intense attention that bothered him. Arreal had no problem being a celebrity. Rather, it was the supposedly candid moments that Rissa was constantly striving for that were taxing. Pressing him on this, he made clear that these were never quite as candid as they might seem at first glance—constantly re-enacting what might at first have been impromptu dialogue or a momentary reflection on emotions. Referring back to the Asian Festival over the summer, having spent days rehearsing with Thomas Djorgi, there was always a video camera present, but it was not always rolling. If Arreal or Thomas made a joke or even a comment about how hard they were working, or if there was an especially touching moment between the two dangdut singers, everything was put on hold to recreate the moment for filming.

Arreal's comments pointed to the fact that the reflexivity characteristic of Reality TV, which functions to validate the Reality of a given filmic moment, often contrasts sharply with the reality of production. During such instances, when "non-media" people are confronted with the social dynamics of media production, "media power" is most susceptible to evaluation and contestation (Couldry 2000a, 2000b; Couldry & Curran 2003). Nick Couldry defines media power as the concentration of symbolic

power afforded to 'the media' as an institution in society. When the reality of production contrasts with the intended Reality of the product—and especially a product that derives much of its potency from an exposition of its own production—media is limited in its ability to represent and portray reality. In Arreal's case, he became annoyed with having to reproduce spontaneity—which, of course, effectively kills anything spontaneous about the moment. Such instances speak to the specificity of the reflexivity characteristic of Reality. Arreal's comments are, of course, a reflexive activity; he is reflecting on the social dynamics of film production. Even Ruby would consider Arreal's words reflexive. But they would not be included in any form of Realistic media, for it is a reflexivity that challenges the authority of Reality media's power. There is, then, a distinction between reflexivity that validates and reflexivity that challenges media power.

After the cocktail hour in the ambassador's foyer, and after everyone had a chance to visit the buffet, we were seated. The Assistant Secretary of State, Goli Ameri, offered a speech, following one of the members of the Parliamentary delegation. She spoke shortly, but addressed the great deeds that can be achieved through cultural diplomacy, and discussed US education efforts in Indonesia. The first time she had heard the word "dangdut," she explained, was on her trip to Yogyakarta the previous

summer, when one of the English language students at an international school responded to her question, "What's your favorite type of music?" Goli Ameri's speech was a validation of dangdut's rights as a token of cultural diplomacy. Far from an obscure or distant tradition that has been canonized as a folk classic (like wayang or gamelan), dangdut exists in the hearts of Indonesia's avid students. And rather than being that which indexes an individual's unshakable cultural baggage on an international stage, once parsed through the field of cultural diplomacy, dangdut becomes a tie to one's roots, their cultural heritage.

Ameri's speech was followed by a few words from the Ambassador on the importance of dangdut in Indonesian culture. After he finished speaking, Ms. Ameri quickly left with her assistant in the silver Landrover that they had come in. When all had finished eating, Arreal performed his set, nearly every song from his album, accompanied not by a band but by instrumental tracks playing from a CD. And, on the way out, every one in attendance was given a gift bag with the *DIA* album, and both a poster and T-shirt with the album's cover on them. Arreal's merchandise was the material evidence of his stardom and dangdut's arrival in America. To date, the two are in Indonesia promoting Arreal's album with television appearances and concerts. *Dangdut in America*, the television show, began airing on Jak-TV on 22 February 2009 at 10:30 pm. Arreal's album is currently on sale via the Internet and has been avidly discussed by dangdut fans on blogs and discussion boards. Ethnomusicologist Jeremy Wallach, whose work has focused on the relationship between popular culture and national politics in Indonesia, has played Arreal's album in his courses as an example of dialogism in the global pop cultural economy. As of 26 February 2009, Arreal and Rissa were headed to Solo, Yogyakarta, Sragen, and Surabaya for a promotional tour of Central and Western Java.



Figure 10, Arreal's merchandise

## Part IV

### *cosmopolitanism's other and neoliberal vigilantism*

*All through these years, we have been singing foreign songs. And now, here he is, singing our music with his own style. This is something new* [Rissa, "DIA in the Press" 2008].

When Arreal first set foot in Indonesia, Rissa's statements and quotes in the press—many similar to the one above—prefigured his arrival. In this statement, as in others, Rissa construes and emphasizes for her interviewers—her friends from Voice of America in this case—*Dangdut in America's* meta-narrative. But of interest is the fact that this reflexive act of construal occurs prior to the event itself. The reflexivity of Reality TV's aesthetic leaks into the stories that Rissa, and everyone involved in production, tells about the pending effect of the project on Indonesia's reality. "This is something new," she tells us, something that will fundamentally alter not only dangdut, but also how we conceive of Indonesian identity.

When Reality is reflexively generated—as it is in most Reality TV shows as well as other types of production including art, literature, documentary film, anthropology, etc., etc.—the meta-narrative is made to prefigure the text itself. Here, dangdut is made to arrive in America, and thus acquire a cosmopolitan value, long before Arreal's face begins to circulate through the Indonesian mass media. Like Riles' concept of the Network, Reality TV's aesthetic conventions "internally generate the effects of their own reality by reflecting on themselves" (2001: 3). That Arreal might herald a new era in dangdut's history is predicated on a Reality in which dangdut has already landed in the US—a "dangdut mania," like that of the Beatles'. Rissa's celebrity-making project is not merely about Arreal, but is about the politics of recognition in an imagined global landscape. Dangdut has just as much a right to explode on the scene as does, say, the Latin-infused pop of the 1990s.

In the above quote, Rissa directs our attention to the symbolic capital—the value—that is characteristically afforded to American media and culture in the Indonesian media. “Foreign songs” stands in not merely for foreign media in general, but for foreign culture at large, which penetrates Indonesia’s will to self-identity. The prestige of foreign culture, Rissa would tell us, comes at a price. Domestic Indonesian pop cultural commodities become devalued as *kampung*, the anti-cosmopolitan, cosmopolitanism’s other. Dangdut—unlike foreign media texts and products—is prohibited from traveling across culture/media worlds, inhibited by the weighty negative stereotypes that the urban middle classes have associated with the genre for decades. And even when it sparked interest in Asia, receiving attention in Malaysia and even Japan, dangdut has never been thought to be a good channel to the West. And, if dangdut can’t travel across cultural worlds, then neither can the Indonesian people whom dangdut has for so long connoted. The danger, then, is that Indonesian-ness, like dangdut, might subsequently slip away and be cast simply as cosmopolitanism’s other.

To reverse such a grave effect, the reflexive faculties of *DIA* would problematize the value afforded to foreign, and particularly American, media. It is a myth, Rissa would say. America is not how you think it is. Her self-identified transnational identity allows her to observe this. The Reality of *Dreams of True* and *Dangdut in America* can expose the value of foreign media for what it really is: a symbolic violence, experienced by those Indonesian citizens who desire to be valued globally. Dangdut’s value does not have to cease to be at the frontlines of the archipelago; it can, in fact, acquire that very special value that trumps all value, and which comes only from a seat at the table of global pop culture.

The unlikely commensurability between dangdut and cosmopolitan value is only possible, however, due to the simultaneous negation and deployment of American media prowess. It is exactly that problematized American media power that is first to be



marshaled on the frontlines of Rissa's intervention. Arreal's—as well as Yuki, Chris, and John's—*American-ness* is mobilized as a means to activate dangdut's dormant cosmopolitan potential. But this contradiction is only problematic if we limit ourselves to considering the identities—American, Indonesian—that Rissa has polarized along certain criteria. To reconcile the contradiction, we must consider along with Rissa the nature of value itself. It is only by reconstituting value in the new economy of *DIA's* Reality that the cosmopolitan attributes linked to the simulacrum of America can be made to point to dangdut itself. But the question remains: How does one go about redefining value?

For dangdut to be a contender in the global pop cultural economy, it must first be fully accepted as a badge of a newly global Indonesia. Although this has been tried before, it has always failed in the end. As Rissa sees it, this is because value remains wedded to a society comprised of rigid social hierarchy. Value is “taxed,” culturally, at the borders of each imagined cultural boundary in a grid of ethnolocal divisions and socioeconomic strata. A culturally and socially divided Indonesia does make for a smooth moral economy. Through *DIA*, dangdut becomes linked to a value that knows no borders, one that recognizes talent and hard work regardless of one's cultural background or affiliations. This is the value of “dreams coming true,” a cosmopolitan value that envelops its other—the value of neoliberalism (Graeber 2001; Bourdieu 1998b; Harvey 2007).

Neoliberalism (or late capitalism), as Graeber points out, can be looked at as a totalizing juggernaut of value, bent to destroy any and all obstacles, be they economic, social, or cultural. This is neoliberalism's *doxa*, the structural rules that govern the various fields of power and form the matrix of social reality (Bourdieu 1977). As in every other social order, neoliberal doxa “tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness” (1977: 166),

such that its normative projects appear self-evident and real. Its structure is a set of relationship between people that appears to be a relationship between things; but in particular, neoliberal doxa produces narratives that serve to validate its own, specific theory of value. National boundaries that were once thought to contain markets are made obsolete through neoliberal doxa, in the face of its totalizing theory of value. Neoliberal doxa dictates that relations between people, like those between things, are of *surmountable difference*. This is made palpable through discourses of multiculturalism and Reality TV. Cultural and social divisions can always be overcome, like the demolition of national borders, such that value might flow freely. The master of surmountable difference is the cosmopolitan, whose seemingly culture-less identity enables cultural dexterity and travel between and across cultures.

Through the Indonesian middle class's rejection of dangdut, Rissa sees neoliberalism's shortcomings in its inability to reproduce its theory of value. In Indonesia's political economy of pop culture, value taxes—unnecessarily—Indonesian products and not others. And the contradiction: If dangdut cannot be made to be an emblem of cosmopolitanism, capable of traveling to the US and back again, why should *foreign songs* be afforded that privilege—and by Indonesians nonetheless?

A *vigilante* is a person who steps outside the normative realm of possibility so as to uphold justice, especially in times when the typical channels of maintaining order are failing. To save dangdut—and Indonesia—somebody had to “have *the guts* to do it,” in Rissa's words. Institutions, and especially governments, always suppress and extinguish vigilante efforts, given that such intervention interferes with the institutional capacity to manage populations. Vigilantes are challenges to the State's capacity to exercise managerial power of its populations (Foucault 1991; Foucault 1990 [1976]). Surprisingly, for Rissa, the rogue media-maker, the State was eager to support her

efforts, while it was the private sector—the media networks—that had an adverse reaction to her project.

A further indication of neoliberalism's shortcomings and a new age of neoliberal governmentality, the post-Soeharto government, recovering from the tumult of recent years, needed a vigilante to get her hands dirty and provide a cosmopolitan emblem of national identity. Rissa did just that. Hers was a project comprised of convergences. In Rissa, Indonesia meets America. In Arreal, dangdut acquires a cosmopolitan charm. In dangdut, the kampung meets the national. Each is an unlikely intersection. Far from the violence of vigilante justice seekers, Rissa is a truly post-modern and neoliberal vigilante, whose taste for the fragmented and disjointed allows such disparate realms to crisscross along a unified theory of value. Her weapon? Only Reality TV's reflexively generated "meta-capital"—its purchase on Reality—could rival the meta-capital of the State (Couldry 2003) in its ability to re-define doxa, and construct a more perfect reality.



*Figure 11, Neoliberal vigilante: Rissa discussing Dangdut in America with the King of Dangdut, Rhoma Irama (courtesy of NSR Productions 2008).*

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