

Global

POP

LANGUAGE

, Local
LANGUAGE

Edited by

Harris M. Berger and
Michael Thomas Carroll

University Press of Mississippi / Jackson

www.upress.state.ms.us

The University Press of Mississippi is a member of the Association of American University Presses.

The editors would like to extend their thanks to Pat Browne, director of Bowling Green State University Press, and to Gary Burns, editor of *Popular Music and Society*, for allowing us to reprint the essays from the special issue of *Popular Music and Society* (Vol. 24.3, fall 2000), which carried the subtitle, "Global Popular Music: The Politics and Aesthetics of Language Choice."

The essays by Tony Mitchell, Paul D. Greene and David R. Henderson, María Elena Cepeda, and Edward Larkey all are reprinted in this volume as they appeared in the original publication. The essays by Alex Perullo and John Fenn, Morgan Gerard and Jack Sidnell, and Cece Cutler are revised versions of the original publication.

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Manufactured in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 4 3 2 1



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Global pop, local language / edited by Harris M. Berger and Michael Thomas Carroll.

p. cm.

In part, originally published in *Global popular music: the politics and aesthetics of language choice*, a special issue of *Popular music and society* (v. 24.3, fall 2000).

ISBN 1-57806-535-6 (alk. paper) — ISBN 1-57806-536-4 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Popular music—History and criticism. 2. Music and language. 3. Sociolinguistics. I. Berger, Harris M., 1966— II. Carroll, Michael Thomas, 1954—

ML3470 .G54 2003

781.63'01'4—dc21

2002152727

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

Contents

vii	Acknowledgments
ix	Introduction: The Politics and Aesthetics of Language Choice and Dialect in Popular Music — <i>Harris M. Berger</i>
	Part One. Language Choice, Popular Music, and Globalization
3	Doin' Damage in My Native Language: The Use of "Resistance Vernaculars" in Hip Hop in France, Italy, and Aotearoa/New Zealand — <i>Tony Mitchell</i>
19	Language Ideologies, Choices, and Practices in Eastern African Hip Hop — <i>Alex Perullo and John Fenn</i>
53	"Goodbye My Blind Majesty": Music, Language, and Politics in the Indonesian Underground — <i>Jeremy Wallach</i>
87	At the Crossroads of Languages, Musics, and Emotions in Kathmandu — <i>Paul D. Greene and David R. Henderson</i>
	Part Two. Nation, Region, and Ethnicity in the Politics of Music and Language
113	<i>Mucho Loco</i> for Ricky Martin; or The Politics of Chronology, Crossover, and Language within the Latin(o) Music "Boom" — <i>María Elena Cepeda</i>

vi	<i>Contents</i>
131	Just for Fun? Language Choice in German Popular Music — <i>Edward Larkey</i>
153	The Choices and Challenges of Local Distinction: Regional Attachments and Dialect in Chinese Music — <i>Sue Tuohy</i>
187	“Ordinary Words”: Sound, Symbolism, and Meaning in Belarusian-Language Rock Music — <i>Maria Paula Survilla</i>
207	Cockney Rock — <i>Dave Laing</i>
233	“Raising One Higher than the Other”: The Hierarchy of Tradition in Representations of Gaelic- and English-Language Song in Ireland — <i>Anthony McCann and Lillis Ó Laoire</i>
	Part Three. Music and Words: Language Choice and Dialect in Song and Performance
269	“Trying to Break It Down”: MCs’ Talk and Social Setting in Drum & Bass Performance — <i>Morgan Gerard and Jack Sidnell</i>
291	Singing Hawaiian and the Aesthetics of (In)Comprehensibility — <i>C. K. Szego</i>
329	“ <i>Chanter en Yaourt</i> ”: Pop Music and Language Choice in France — <i>Cece Cutler</i>
349	Contributors

Acknowledgments

The editors of this volume would like to thank Pat Browne of Bowling Green State University Popular Press and Gary Burns of the journal *Popular Music and Society* for permission to reprint some of the chapters included here. We would also like to thank the Department of Performance Studies at Texas A&M University for support of this project in its various stages.

“Goodbye My Blind Majesty”

Music, Language, and Politics in the Indonesian Underground

—Jeremy Wallach

Much of the currently fashionable discourse on “global English” predicts that the English language will have a progressively greater presence in the popular cultures of nations subjected to globalizing forces. While demonstrably true in some cases, such a claim underestimates continuing attachments to national and local languages, as well as the semiautonomous creative development of imported cultural forms once they take root in new settings. In this essay, I discuss issues of language choice in Indonesian “underground” rock music and document a remarkable shift over the last decade that defies the global English thesis: once the dominant language of Indonesian underground rock, English has given way to Indonesian as the preferred language for underground song lyrics.

Keeping in mind that musicians are social agents whose practices must be understood in the context of their larger creative and social purposes (Berger), I will examine the social, historical, and political forces that helped motivate Indonesian underground musicians to sing their songs in the national vernacular instead of in English and the rewards and creative challenges they faced in doing so. Specifically, I will argue that the remarkable growth of an indigenous underground music movement in Indonesia precipitated a shift in consciousness among its participants, such that they began to imagine their primary audience not as an abstract, English-speaking global music subculture but as a national, Indonesian-speaking musical community composed of active local scenes distributed throughout the country. This growing underground music movement was strengthened by the proliferation of Indonesian-language underground songs, which made the music accessible to a larger segment of the national audience. In this

context, underground musicians switched to Indonesian not out of a desire to “indigenize” the music but with the aim of making their music resemble more closely underground music in the West, which they viewed as using everyday language to convey urgent and powerful messages to its listeners.

The following discussion focuses on a small number of musical innovators in the underground who consciously refashioned the Indonesian language to make it compatible with underground music’s poetics of vernacular speech, emotional directness, and sonic aggression. My arguments are based on interviews and ethnographic participant observation conducted in Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Denpasar in 1997 and 1999–2000; E-mail correspondence with interviewees since then; and the contents of a variety of Indonesian-language Internet sites devoted to underground music.

After a brief introduction to the underground music movement in Indonesia and a description of the social and political context in which it developed, I review the linguistic options potentially available to underground lyricists and summarize the advantages and disadvantages of each in the opinions of underground scene members. I then investigate reasons behind the growing popularity of Indonesian- versus English-language underground music and discuss possible future developments in the underground during the current period of chaotic political and social transition in Indonesia.

The Poetics of Musical Translation

What difference does language choice really make in popular music lyrics? A satisfactory response to this question must address the complex interplay of form and meaning that is fundamental to all musical expressions. A language’s iconicities and sonorities, essential to what Roman Jakobson terms its “poetic” function, can be very difficult indeed to “translate,” based as they are on the material specificity of a particular linguistic code and the sensorial effects of its material presence. This is not to say that one language may be more “poetic” than another; rather, my aim is to draw attention to the different formal properties of languages, which are exploited poetically in diverse ways by their speakers.

Song, of course, highlights language’s poetic aspect. Shifting from one language to another in a musical genre is therefore not a simple, straightforward

process, since songs in that genre may exploit poetically significant features characteristic of the first language but absent in the second. This alone can constitute a formidable creative challenge to musical translation, but there is a further complicating factor beyond differences in formal properties: the weight of each language’s prior history of utterances tends to condition its expressive possibilities in different ways. For instance, in their attempt to adapt their language to the stylistic parameters of English-language underground rock music, Indonesian musicians had to confront a long history of Indonesian-language popular song lyrics characterized by “elevated” literary expression, poetic indirection, and sentimentality, all of which were anathema to the styles they wished to emulate.

It is not surprising, then, that many Indonesian underground music fans in the early years of the movement were skeptical about whether their national language could ever become a satisfying vehicle for underground rock music lyrics. Despite the fact that few were proficient in the language, many scene members viewed English favorably, not only as an “international” language but also as the most sonically appropriate linguistic option for underground music. In this sense, their attitude resembled that of American opera enthusiasts who prefer to hear arias sung in Italian or German even though they may not completely understand the meaning of the words.

Underground Rock in Indonesia

In order to grasp what was at stake in the language games of the Indonesian underground, it is necessary to provide a historical and ethnographic sketch of this largely undocumented youth music movement. In contemporary Indonesia, “*underground*” (the English term is used) is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of imported rock music genres on the loud side of the spectrum.¹ These genres, called *aliran* (streams), include hardcore, punk, death metal, “Oi!” (skinhead music), grindcore, ska, gothic, grunge, and black metal.² These musics arrived in Indonesia in the late 1980s and began to attract an enthusiastic audience of predominantly male, middle-class, urban youth. Some of these fans formed bands dedicated to “covering” the songs of their favorite underground groups, with vocalists approximating the sounds of the English lyrics they contained. Later, some groups began to create and record their own songs. Since 1991 or so, a loose

network of bands, small record labels, fanzines, and performance venues dedicated to underground music has existed in Indonesia, with full-blown local scenes emerging in most major cities by the end of the decade.

Indonesian underground bands usually choose English monikers that stylistically resemble those of Western groups; examples include Burger Kill, Vindictive Emperor, Corporation of Bleeding, Full of Hate, Kill I Can, Hellgods, Betrayer, Death Vomit, Virus Kingdom, and Purgatory. Occasionally band monikers are in other nonindigenous languages, such as Grausig, (German for “scary”), Puppen (Dutch for “shit”), and Arrigato (Japanese for “thank-you”). A small number of groups choose Indonesian names: Tengkorak (skull), Restu Ibu (mother’s blessing), Tumbal (an object used to ward off evil), Kremasi (cremation), and Trauma (trauma). Musically, Indonesian underground bands do not differ markedly from their Western counterparts, and nearly all musicians begin their careers playing songs by Western groups. Most bands attempt to stay within the stylistic parameters of their chosen genre with regard to instrumentation, performance practice, and sonic approach, though many experienced groups have developed their own distinctive sounds within these parameters by which they are identified in the scene.

Urban, middle-class, male university and high school students remain the primary consumers and producers of Indonesian underground music. Female students are involved in smaller but significant numbers, and some join bands as both vocalists and instrumentalists. In a developing country where higher education is a privilege of the very few, these students form a miniscule percentage of Indonesia’s relatively youthful population, yet their musical and cultural influence is substantial.³ The underground community increasingly has begun to expand beyond its original constituency as larger numbers of rural and working-class youth (once again, mostly, but not exclusively, male) embrace the music. This is particularly the case within the black metal and punk communities, perhaps because these genres rely more on performative spectacle than lyric-focused genres like death metal and hardcore.⁴ The latter two genres seem to have their largest constituencies in the capital city of Jakarta, while black metal tends to be popular in provincial capitals and rural areas.

The Indonesian underground music movement appears to have developed relatively autonomously, guided by indigenous interpretations of imported media (fanzines, recordings, and videos, among others) without much direct contact with Westerners. This distinguishes it from rock music

phenomena in other Asian countries such as mainland China, where foreigners have played an important role in local scene developments as advisers, performers, and audience members (Cynthia Wong, pers. comm.). In general, the growth of Indonesian underground music can be viewed as a creative response by Indonesian youth to two recent macrosocial developments: first, the increased globalization of Western popular music; second, the dramatic political and social upheavals that have characterized Indonesian society in the last decade. These two contextualizing factors are central to any examination of language choice issues in underground music.

Musical Globalization and Indonesian Pop

Many studies of cultural globalization focus on the impact of global culture on conservative or formerly isolated societies; in contrast, Indonesia (and Southeast Asia in general) has been characterized by “patterns, going back millennia, of creatively assimilating or absorbing the influences and peoples emanating from outside . . . [into] indigenous structures and values, and creating out of them a new synthesis” (Lockard xiv).⁵ Such patterns of assimilation and appropriation are readily apparent in the development of Indonesian recorded popular music in the twentieth century. Though it is best known in the West for Javanese *gamelan* and other indigenous performance traditions, Indonesia has had a long and distinguished history of producing Western-influenced popular musics sung in the national vernacular and currently enjoys one of the liveliest and most diverse pop music markets in the world.⁶ Indonesian popular music genres range from the Indian- and Arab-influenced *dangdut* to melodramatic pop ballads to sophisticated jazz and jazz/rock fusion. Indonesian rock music enjoys tremendous popularity, and groups like Slank, Gong 2000, and Boomerang—influenced by bands such as the Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, Nirvana, and Metallica—have large and loyal followings. In the midst of this hybridic diversity, the underground music movement represented a departure from the typical ways in which foreign popular musics were assimilated into Indonesian life and was symptomatic of globalizing processes in music in which technological advances empower the global and the local at the expense of the once-dominant national level of cultural production.

The underground arose during a period when urban, middle-class Indonesians had unprecedented direct access to the products of the global

entertainment industry. This access was the result of new communications technologies (notably satellite television and the Internet) and the aggressively expansionist marketing strategies of transnational multimedia conglomerates. The arrival of MTV Indonesia in November 1994 had a particularly dramatic impact on local music-making, increasing Indonesians' familiarity with Western recording artists and with global youth-oriented genres such as rap, R&B, alternative rock, and metal.

The increased access to Western popular culture enabled Indonesian youth to explore musics that were produced outside of corporate media control. Indonesian fans learned about nonmainstream rock genres, first from commercial crossovers promoted in the global media and later from their own forays into the direct-mail-order world of small, independent recording labels and low-budget fanzines. In the West Javanese city of Bandung, the location of one of the earliest and most influential scenes, the underground community began with a small group of teenaged skateboarding enthusiasts who, through exposure to the media of the international skateboarding subculture, learned about the aggressive metal and punk music hybrids that formed the soundtrack to their chosen hobby in Western countries. In this manner—beginning with the products of global corporate media and then searching beyond them—Indonesian young people gradually gained access to the grassroots networks that had sustained nonmainstream and sometimes anticommmercial rock genres since the late 1970s (Azerrad). These networks connected local scenes around the world that valorized autonomous creative expression over business profits and that preferred to work outside the official channels of the music business (Goshert 90–92). From these networks and the flows of knowledge they channeled, Indonesian scene members learned about the cultural context and philosophical underpinnings of independently produced underground music, and, most important, they learned of a new approach to musical production and distribution that would permit the exercise of creative freedoms that the mainstream Indonesian music industry denied them.

The D.I.Y. Philosophy

Musik underground could have merely been the most recent of a long series of Western popular music styles to become fashionable

among Indonesian youth were it not for the fact that the music carried with it an ethos of “D.I.Y.” (Do It Yourself).⁷ This ethos encouraged bands performing underground music to record and release albums on their own, with whatever resources were available to them, instead of waiting to obtain a recording contract with a large record company. Aspiring underground musicians in Indonesia were able to take advantage of an abundance of inexpensive recording studios located in urban areas. Local rock and pop bands originally used these facilities to record promotional “demo tapes”—rough recorded versions of songs that groups would use to obtain live engagements and, for a lucky few, a recording contract. For underground bands, however, these homemade recordings became the finished product and were duplicated and sold through mostly informal channels. As veteran members of the scene grew older and more concerned with making a living, many opened small rehearsal and recording studios specializing in the production of underground cassettes. Local bands could rent these studios at reasonable rates. While modestly equipped by professional standards, many of these facilities have produced recordings of surprisingly high sound quality.⁸

The D.I.Y. ethos, coupled with the increasing availability of inexpensive recording and rehearsal facilities, contributed to a dramatic and unprecedented upsurge of independent cassette releases between 1991 and 2001. Significantly, bands that created these cassettes were not constrained by the rules of the music business in Indonesia, including the nearly compulsory use of the national vernacular in song lyrics. They could record songs in English that lacked catchy melodies or even pitched vocals and write lyrics that addressed topics considered too controversial by the mainstream.

The majority of underground groups still release cassettes on small independent labels, though the number of bands with “major label” contracts is increasing as some underground styles become more popular.⁹ Even these major label releases show the traces of a musical style that developed outside the official channels of the national recording industry, and in one case, a punk group called Rage Generation Brothers released an album on a large national label, Aquarius Musikindo, with almost all of the songs in English (eleven out of twelve tracks). Thus the rise of the underground, spurred on by globalizing musical and technological forces, eventually transformed the Indonesian musical mainstream—a case of local appropriations of global

cultural forms influencing cultural production on a national level. This may well become a common pattern in an increasingly globalized world.

Indonesian Politics and the Underground

The second key context for understanding the Indonesian underground movement is Indonesia's political situation in the 1990s. The growth of local underground music scenes began in the final years of former President Soeharto's rapacious and repressive New Order regime, which lasted from 1966 until 1998. In the wake of the 1997–98 Asian economic crisis, the New Order was toppled through the efforts of student protesters (many of whom were underground rock enthusiasts), factions in the military, and political opposition leaders. In Indonesia's current postdictatorship climate of free expression and incipient democratization, the musical underground has continued to develop and expand, in spite of the country's continuing economic crisis and political instability.

Everyone I spoke with agreed that underground musicians had far greater freedom in the post–New Order era of *Reformasi* (reform) than they had under Soeharto. As in the West, however, opinion in the Indonesian underground community was divided on the appropriateness of mixing music and explicit political messages and whether a coherent progressive politics is, can, or should be articulated by underground music. A group of university student fans in Jakarta once told me the only ideology the underground movement possessed was an "*ideologi pembebasan*"—an ideology of liberation. But such an ideology has significant political ramifications under a military dictatorship. Indeed, the artistic and social freedoms celebrated in the underground scene were fundamentally at odds with the practices of a totalitarian government. While the regime never cracked down on underground artists, most scene members adopted an oppositional stance toward Soeharto's rule, and many with whom I spoke suggested that the anger and negativity of underground music resonated with many young Indonesians who grew up under an oppressive regime prone to violence against its own citizens.¹⁰ However, underground opposition to the Soeharto regime was not commonly extended to include an opposition to the regime's overseas supporters, the United States prominently among them. Therefore, underground scene members did not, for the most part, perceive any contradiction between

embracing elements from global popular culture and opposing a dictatorship propped up by global capitalist interests.

Expressions of political protest in the underground increased in the months before the New Order's downfall. Some scene members, like Puppen's Arian Tigabelas, were active in the student movement that helped topple Soeharto, and locally produced fanzines covering underground scenes often contained articles explaining, in plainspoken Indonesian, various streams of leftist thought, from feminism to anarchism to animal liberation. Dominant political themes in the underground included opposition to capitalism, racism, and militarism; many scene members were also familiar with the ideological movements that emerged from within Western underground subcultures, such as "straight edge" (a punk-based movement for voluntary abstention from promiscuity and substance abuse) and the antiracist skinhead movement. In contemporary post–New Order Indonesia, where left-of-center thought is still routinely equated with reviled Communism, the active presence of leftist political discourse in Indonesian student culture stems in part from such discourse's association with underground rock music.

Political lyrics have been especially prevalent in Indonesian punk, hardcore, and grindcore songs—all genres that tend to take on political and social themes in the West as well. Despite a general tendency toward a nonpolitical, music-for-music's sake orientation in the international metal subculture (Roccor 83), Indonesian metal bands of various subgenres have also been among the most politically outspoken. In fact, impassioned and courageous indictments of the Soeharto regime and the military were common in underground music well before the regime was toppled. For example, on a song entitled "The Pain Remains the Same" released in 1997, the Surabaya-based death metal band Slowdeath sang (in English), "*There is no difference between Dutch colonialism and the New Order!*"—a statement that could have landed the band members in prison. The often violent imagery in the songs of many Indonesian underground bands was frequently supplemented by cover art and album graphics that incorporated press photographs of atrocities committed by the Indonesian army or police. While examples such as these may interest popular music researchers preoccupied with the relationship between music and social change, underground scene members themselves do not attribute an active political role to the music, perhaps because

they view it more as an expressive form than an instrument for coordinating group action.

Arian Tigabelas from Puppen explained to me that he writes lyrics about his feelings (*perasaan*), and sometimes these feelings are reactions to political matters. For the most part, underground songwriters claim they write for themselves first, and secondly for anyone who feels the music “represents” him or her. They tend not to connect their music to larger political or social goals; as perhaps in the majority of world popular musics, politics follows from affect, not vice versa, and affective rather than didactic language dominates in song lyrics. Thus the emotional impact of language conjoined with music is essential to the underground phenomenon and to any sociopolitical consequences of its presence in Indonesia.

Unity across Difference: The Underground's Political Project

The connections between underground music and political activism are in the end perhaps less important than the internal politics of the local scenes. “Unity” is an important slogan in underground scenes across Indonesia and the subject of countless fanzine editorials. These view cooperation between the *aliran* as crucial if not wholly unproblematic, and much of the rhetoric of scene unity bears a striking resemblance to Indonesian nationalism's rhetoric of “unity in diversity.” While tensions exist between followers of different genres, sometimes resulting in violent incidents at concerts, punk, death metal, black metal, and hardcore fans continue to share space and recognize their shared allegiances to the underground ethos of independence and self-expression.

It is striking that commentators in the underground scene regard the divisions between followers of different genres to be the most problematic social difference in a musical movement that, like Indonesia as a whole, is deeply divided along ethnic, religious, linguistic, and class lines. During a late-night rap session in Surabaya, an underground scene veteran pointed out to me that everyone in the room came from a different class background, from very rich to middle-class to poor, but that everyone got along because such distinctions “are not mentioned” (*tidak diungkap*). He added that the same held true for ethnicity: the half-dozen young men hanging out that

night included ethnic Javanese, Chinese, and one Surabayan of Arab descent. It is not at all unusual for underground bands to include members from different ethnic groups and to contain both Christians and Muslims who thank Jesus or Allah, respectively, in the liner notes of their cassettes at the beginning of their individual “thank-you” lists.

The concern with “unity” in the underground is consistent with both Indonesian nationalist discourse and Indonesian social norms that emphasize tolerance and social harmony. Similarly, the antisocial, nihilistic tendencies of some underground music in the West are far less apparent in Indonesia, where social relationships are generally cooperative and supportive and where Western-style, individualistic competition is a new and unpopular notion. One underground fanzine from Pare, East Java, *Dysphonic Newsletter*, even stamps the English slogan “*Be United & Fuck Individualism*” on the back of stickers they produce. Indeed, rather than name social alienation, their families, or existential angst as the cause of their musically expressed anger, many underground fans asserted that the sonic and affective extremism of underground music is a reaction to years of being oppressed by the Indonesian government and the military. To them, a unified underground community appears to constitute a utopian analogue to the old nationalist dream of a unified, multiethnic, harmonious Indonesian nation-state, a dream that for many Indonesian youth had been brutally extinguished by the corruption, social injustice, and state violence of the Soeharto regime and the chaos of its aftermath.

Whether or not underground music contributed decisively to the New Order's downfall, the growth of the Indonesian underground scene illustrates how globally circulating popular cultural artifacts can provide a vehicle for the aspirations, desires, and identity projects of youth in developing countries, particularly those who are urban and educated and have access to electronic media (Greene). While international artists such as Rage Against the Machine, Korn, the Dead Kennedys, Napalm Death, Cannibal Corpse, Sepultura, the Ramones, and Biohazard are still respected and celebrated as “influences,” Indonesian underground fans increasingly listen to underground music created by and for Indonesians. In addition to being easier to obtain and much less expensive to purchase, these homegrown sounds often are better able to address the concerns and aspirations of their audience than those that originate outside of the national context, though this is not necessarily because they are sung in an indigenous language instead of English.

The question every Indonesian underground musician faces is whether to sing songs in the same language as his or her influences or sing in a language more accessible to a local audience. The next section will examine the various linguistic options available to Indonesian underground lyricists and the complexities and risks involved in choosing between them. As we shall see, the allure of the global ecumene, the rhetoric of scene unity, the drive for self-expression, and a politically oppositional consciousness all play important roles in this choice, as do the poetic features of the languages in question.

Linguistic Options in the Underground

Indonesia is well known in the ethnographic literature as a nation containing hundreds of indigenous languages and dialects that coexist in complex ways. Aspiring Indonesian songwriters thus face a number of choices when deciding in what language they will sing. The official national vernacular, Indonesian, is based on the Malay lingua franca of the Dutch East Indies and is now spoken nearly everywhere in the country; it is the language of the mass media, government, and education.¹¹ Indonesian is also the obvious choice for mainstream recording artists seeking a national audience. Throughout Indonesia's history, speaking (and singing) in Indonesian has been an expression of patriotism, upward mobility, and a commitment to the vision of Indonesia as a modern, forward-looking nation (Anderson 139–51; Oetomo).

On the other hand, very few young Indonesians speak Indonesian as a first language, and even fewer regularly speak the stilted, poetic Indonesian that is employed in nearly all popular song lyrics, regardless of genre. In Bandung, for instance, underground musicians will sing songs in Indonesian or English, but offstage with their friends they speak Sundanese, the language of the dominant ethnic group of West Java province. In Surabaya and other cities in East and Central Java, local punks and metal enthusiasts speak a dialect of *ngoko*, Low Javanese, with their friends but use Indonesian when speaking from the concert stage. Even in multiethnic Jakarta, when socializing with peers most young people do not speak the Standard Indonesian (*bahasa Indonesia baku*) used in the classroom but instead speak Jakartanese, a slang-filled, pithy urban dialect based on *bahasa Betawi*, the Malay variant spoken by the city's original native inhabitants.¹²

Despite the centrality of the so-called regional languages (*bahasa daerah*) in the everyday social life of underground fans (and Indonesians in general), they are generally not used for underground song lyrics. Disadvantages of using local languages include their provincialism and their association with "backward" village life. With the exception of Jakartanese, which is the basis for hip youth slang throughout the archipelago, the speech communities for regional languages are usually confined to the inhabitants of a particular area and/or members of a specific ethnic group, thus limiting the audience for songs in these languages. Another drawback is that the language used in everyday speech among intimates, including Jakartanese, is often seen as rather coarse and vulgar (*kasar*) and considered inappropriate for public expressions. It is the language of joking and laughing and gossip, of informal socializing, but not profound artistic expression.¹³ Moreover, according to one Bandung artist, using Jakartanese constructions in a song makes the singer seem "arrogant" (*sombong*) and presumptuous, since his or her intended addressees include nonintimates.

More refined registers of regional languages are also inappropriate for rock song lyrics as they are strongly associated with elders and traditional culture, neither of which is very compatible with modern, youth-oriented music. The florid language of Javanese court culture, for example, is inextricably associated with *gamelan* and other traditional genres and would be an unlikely candidate indeed for the language of a punk song. Additionally, regional languages of any register are often considered inseparable from regional musical traditions. When I asked the Sundanese members of one underground group why they never tried singing in Sundanese, they laughed and said they didn't sing "ethnic" music.

A final disadvantage of regional languages as an option for underground music lyrics is that the underground community in Indonesia is self-consciously national in scope. The frequent interactions between, for example, scenes in Javanese-speaking Surabaya and Yogyakarta, Sundanese-speaking Bandung, Indonesian/Jakartanese-speaking Jakarta, and Balinese-speaking Denpasar in the form of letters, E-mail messages, Web sites, and guest appearances at concert events reinforce the use of the national language as the main medium of communication in the underground. This is why even during the underground's early years, when most groups sang in English, fanzines were always written in Indonesian. Thus the transregional networks

that sustain the Indonesian underground strengthen a sense of national belonging among its members, though this is perhaps not what one would expect from a cultural form that originated from elsewhere and would appear to encourage supranational allegiances.

In fact, most young Indonesians possess overlapping allegiances to local, national, and global entities. This is apparent in their everyday language use, which is characterized by frequent code switching between English, Indonesian, and regional languages in informal speech and writing (especially in E-mail messages). Yet underground rock songs that combine one or more languages are exceedingly rare, perhaps because code switching in publicly circulating discourse is usually viewed as overly informal, even frivolous. Therefore, songwriters face a difficult either/or decision when contemplating what language to sing in, and, given the aforementioned disadvantages of singing in regional tongues, the choice is most often between English and Indonesian.

English in Indonesia

English is a language both ubiquitous and poorly understood in contemporary Indonesian society. In a study of commercial popular music in West Java, Sean Williams writes

English usage was and still is a very prestigious matter in Indonesian society, and the Sundanese are no exception. Inserting catchy English phrases into the conversation (such as “to the point” and “up to you”) is considered stylish and educated and worldly, in much the same way that an American’s use of French (*laissez faire* or *je ne sais quoi*) could be. (109)

Williams’s analogy to French expressions in English is illuminating, since an English speaker’s use of particular French words and phrases does not necessarily suggest that he or she can actually *speak* French—the aura of sophistication created by these expressions does not require speakers to demonstrate fluency or even competence in the language being quoted. In a similar way, “catchy English phrases” appear frequently in the Indonesian mass media, particularly in advertising, to add an aura of cosmopolitanism and sophistication to Indonesian-language texts, and in the underground scene itself English

expressions such as “*old school*,” “*straight ahead*,” and “*sell out*” are commonplace in spoken and written (Web site and fanzine) discourse. These instances of English use do not carry with them the expectation that readers and listeners know much English beyond these particular words and phrases—in many cases, they do not. Regardless of their level of fluency, however, many Indonesians regard English as *the* language of global power and prestige, and many consider international English-language pop music to be superior to Indonesia’s indigenous versions.

Virtually every pop, rock, and underground musician I interviewed in Indonesia listed Western rather than Indonesian groups as primary influences. For decades Indonesian rock and pop bands learned to play together by covering English-language songs, and English-language cover bands have long been ubiquitous in nightclubs, malls, and other venues (as they are in most of Southeast Asia). However, prior to the proliferation of D.I.Y. productions, mass-produced music recordings were nearly always sung in Indonesian, since music business personnel did not think songs in a foreign language would be commercially successful in the national market. The underground’s relative autonomy from the mainstream music industry allowed bands the freedom to choose what language in which to sing. Indeed, for many the choice *not* to sing in Indonesian was one indication of their music’s separation from the mainstream music business. While Indonesian record companies discouraged English-language songs because their **potential** national audience was limited, members of the underground scene were less interested in their music reaching the undifferentiated mass public outside their specialized subculture. The majority of early groups therefore chose to write songs in a language that not only enjoyed great prestige in their own country but would also, at least in theory, make their musical accessible to an international audience of cultural insiders.

The Advantages of English

The use of English in lyrics by Indonesian underground musicians cannot be entirely dismissed as mere mimicry of foreign influences, an example of the pursuit of trendiness and sophistication, or even an attempt to garner a global audience’s attention. While the use of English remains a compelling index of cultural capital in Indonesia, Indonesians, particularly

educated youth, also use English to express deeply personal thoughts and emotions. Many young urban Indonesians use English words and phrases in courtship and romance, for example, and employ English expletives to express anger and disgust, since these are considered safer than indigenous obscenities.

The connection between English and direct, uninhibited emotional expressions of love and particularly of anger has implications for the role of English in underground music. When asked why they liked underground music, scene members often emphasized the genre's emotional power. Underground musicians were said to "*mengeluarkan suara hati*" (release the voice of the heart) through their music. One fan answered my question concerning his enthusiasm for underground music with a single English cognate: "*ekspresi*" (expressiveness). Thus the use of English by an Indonesian band does not detract from their music's authenticity of expression and can even augment it. This leads to an unsurprising conclusion: much like other pop music fans all over the world, Indonesian fans are moved by and locate authenticity in powerful music, even when they cannot understand the meaning of all the lyrics.¹⁴ Furthermore, for some Indonesians, conveying certain types of strong emotions in English may be considered safer, more suitable, or both compared to using Indonesian.

As mentioned above, early underground bands sang primarily in English. The English these groups employed varied considerably with regard to what a native speaker would recognize as correct grammar and syntax and was often incomprehensible to its audience. As the previous discussion indicates, the reasons why many Indonesian underground groups would choose to laboriously piece together lyrics with a dictionary rather than sing in a language they and their audience could easily understand are complex. Here in summarized form are the main arguments for choosing English, according to my conversations and interviews with scene members.

1. *Influences.* The bands that exerted a formative influence on the early scene (and continue to do so) were from Great Britain and America and sang in English. Thus English was the natural choice for music intended to iconically resemble as much as possible the songs performed by these bands.

2. *Phonology and Syntax.* Many participants in the underground scene complained that Indonesian is "stiff" (*kaku*) compared to English as a language for underground song lyrics. According to Yukie, lead singer of

veteran rock group Pas, one of Bandung's first underground bands, Indonesian is less "flexible" (*fleksibel*) than English in that Indonesian songs tend to be soft (*lembut*), romantic, and melancholy and tend not to vary rhythmically. In contrast, he said, English-language underground music is characterized by sudden and dramatic timbral and rhythmic transitions. Yukie originally thought these transitions would be impossible to replicate in Indonesian.

In fact, Indonesian and English are not very distant phonologically. One significant difference, however, with regard to how the spoken languages sound is the tendency in English for speakers (and singers) to shorten unstressed syllables and replace their vowel sounds with neutral vowels. For example, "anthropology" is often pronounced by English speakers as "anthruh-PAH-luh-gee." Nonneutral vowel sounds are always fully enunciated in Indonesian whether or not they are part of stressed syllables, as they are in Spanish. Thus "*perjalanan*" (journey) is always pronounced "per-jah-LAH-nahn," never "per-juh-LAH-nun," and the Indonesian word for "anthropology," "*antropologi*," is always pronounced "an-tro-PO-lo-ghee." (The significance of this difference between English and Indonesian was underscored for me when I once ordered a well-known global brand of soft drink and was surprised when the drink stand's proprietor corrected my American pronunciation. In Indonesia, the correct pronunciation is "koke-ah-KOLE-ah.") This feature of pronunciation may be one cause of Indonesian's relative "stiffness" to which Yukie refers, as it tends to create a smoother, more uniform rhythmic cadence when sung.

Another significant phonological dissimilarity is the absence of aspirated consonants in Indonesian. To many Indonesian underground fans, the percussive, harsh sounds of English consonants are constitutive of fierce, powerful hardcore/metal vocals, and Indonesian lacks any ready phonological equivalent. In fact, consonant sounds are often elided in rapid speech. Thus many supporters of English in the underground scene claim that Indonesian just doesn't "fit" or "sound right" in the context of underground music. The material differences between the two languages extend to the level of syntax; many singers contend Indonesian does not lend itself to direct expression because what takes very few words to express in English requires many more in Indonesian. I was frequently told that one line of verse in the former language was equivalent to two in the latter.

3. *Disassociation from Indonesian Pop Music.* Using English avoids the problems of trying to create convincing underground songs in Indonesian. For many, Indonesian is inextricably associated with Indonesian popular music styles, and therefore underground lyricists must take care to avoid the clichés and poetic devices used in commercial Indonesian pop, lest their music sound overly sentimental, hackneyed, and mainstream. One Bandung group, Cherry Bombshell, proudly claimed to me that none of their songs contained the word “*cinta*” (love), a word ubiquitous in Indonesian popular music lyrics. Many in the underground regarded Indonesian popular music, particularly those genres that appeal to the working class, as overly fatalistic, bathetic, and backward. In the disparaging words of one university student punk musician, “Indonesian is only good for *dangdut*”—the working-class-identified, syncretic popular music genre that for many in the scene constituted the mass-culture antithesis of *musik underground*.

4. *Politics.* Writing songs in English allows greater freedom of political expression. Government censors were far less likely to notice the lyrics of songs sung in a foreign language, and although now the threat of censorship and government intervention is less severe, many songwriters still admit that they feel more comfortable expressing political convictions in English than in Indonesian. In the words of Yukie, from Pas, “If you say ‘*fuck the government*,’ no one cares. But if you say the same thing in Indonesian you get in real trouble!” Arian Tigabelas commented that an English-language T-shirt slogan, “*Fuck Your God*,” found in a Jakarta underground boutique could never be translated into Indonesian, since antireligious sentiment is unacceptable in Indonesian society. He laughed, saying that anyone foolish enough to wear a shirt with the slogan “*Persetan dengan Tuhanmu*” “would be chased by the *Laskar Jihad* [Holy War Militia, a radical Indonesian Islamic organization that became infamous for its threats against Americans]!” English is thus a vehicle for transgressive statements in the underground that would be far more dangerous if rendered in Indonesian (see Sen and Hill 177).

Political messages in English are also found in album liner notes. For example, included in the notes of metal band Purgatory’s cassette *Ambang Kepunahan* (Threshold of Extinction) is the following statement: “*No Thank To: Political Clowns Who Gots The Double Face and also To Indonesian Army Who Repressing The Students and Indonesian People since 30 years ago until*

NOW!!!” Sentiments such as these, particularly when the target is unambiguous, are almost always rendered in English, regardless of the language used in the rest of the liner notes and in the lyrics.

To conclude, underground rock fans view English both as a link to the world outside Indonesia and as an outlet for direct emotional expression and unfettered political commentary. Like Western popular music itself, the English language is simultaneously exotic and intimate to members of the Indonesian underground movement. However, it is important to reiterate that despite its popularity, English is a language relatively few Indonesians have mastered (Mulder 174). Although most begin studying the language starting in middle school, the method of instruction tends to center around memorizing English’s complex and often senseless grammatical conventions, which many Indonesians find baffling, and tends to underemphasize conversational and communication skills. As a result, even Indonesians who interact frequently with English-speaking foreigners may feel uncomfortable speaking English with them, and Indonesian students who are not inclined or who are unable to study hard in school often know very little English, including many of those who continue their education beyond high school. There are of course exceptions to this rule. Jill Jennifer, the Manadonese lead singer of the Jakarta hardcore group Step Forward, speaks fluent, idiomatic American English, a skill she claims to have learned “*from the TV*.” Significantly, even Jill, who has no trouble writing lyrics in English, has recently begun writing songs in Indonesian, even though she admits this is more difficult for her.

The Advantages of Indonesian

Despite the cosmopolitan attractions of English, an increasing number of underground groups have begun writing songs in Indonesian. This has occurred for a number of reasons that relate to the desire for comprehensibility, the drive for uniqueness, commercial pressures, and, most of all, the consciousness of a national underground community. Significantly, the shift has not occurred as a result of any pressure exerted by other scene members. The bands’ choice of which language to employ in their lyrics is their decision alone, according to underground’s ideology of freedom and self-expression, and the topic does not appear to be a subject of much debate in fanzines or discussions among scene members. The rise of Indonesian and

the decline of English therefore appear to have resulted from voluntary decisions by individual songwriters. According to my interlocutors, there are a number of reasons for choosing Indonesian over English. They include:

1. *Comprehensibility.* The meaning of Indonesian lyrics and the messages they contain are more accessible to the listener, and the meaning of the lyrics is “easier to catch” (*lebih gampang ditangkap*). The use of Indonesian lyrics facilitates communication between musician and listener and shows greater consideration for the Indonesian audience. As one hardcore musician put it, “It’s a pity (*kasihan*) if they have to go running to a dictionary just to understand the lyrics!” As the imagined “underground community” in Indonesia became more of a phenomenological reality for its participants, musicians became increasingly sensitive to the needs of their national audience and increasingly sought to communicate with them despite the difficulties of forging a new linguistic register adequate to the task. Moreover, the increasing number of rural and working-class fans of underground music meant a greater percentage of the audience had very limited English comprehension.

2. *Uniqueness.* A few underground artists told me that singing in Indonesian makes their songs sound distinctive and unique compared to those of their Anglo-American counterparts. This realization was an ironic result of Indonesian bands successfully making contact—first through letters and later through the Internet—with underground scenes overseas. To their surprise, foreign underground scene members were often more interested in Indonesian underground music that sounded “Indonesian” in some way than they were in English-language songs. This reaction was a relevant factor for only a small number of artists who were able to establish substantive contacts with scenes in the United States and other countries, but the encouragement by outsiders to “sound Indonesian” was a key catalyst for early experiments with Indonesian-language underground songs.

3. *Commercial Pressures.* The larger recording companies strongly prefer to record songs in Indonesian and limit the number of English songs on albums they release because they believe songs sung in a foreign language are not commercially viable. As more underground groups are signed to larger independent and major labels, they increasingly find themselves under pressure to sing in the national language.

The cassette liner notes for the *Metalik Klinik 3* compilation contain the slogan (in English): “UNDERGROUND MUSIC IS NO LONGER BEYOND

YOUR VISION.” This collection is the third volume of a successful series released by Rotorcorp, a subsidiary of one of Indonesia’s largest national recording companies, Musica. All the songs on the compilation, which contains bands from various metal *aliran*, are in Indonesian. Due to efforts like this one by large commercial record labels, underground Indonesian metal is indeed “no longer beyond [the] vision” and grasp of many potential fans, but it is certainly no coincidence that the songs chosen for the compilation are sung in a language most likely to attract a large national audience. Even groups such as Slowdeath that normally sing in English contributed Indonesian-language songs to the album. Similarly, recordings by metal bands on “major labels” such as Purgatory, Grausig, and Tengkorak are all or mostly in Indonesian, which appears to be a major factor in the rapid expansion of the Indonesian underground metal audience beyond the urban student population.

4. *Community.* Ultimately, the most important factor in the rise of Indonesian-language underground music was that underground musicians’ perceived audience became less an imagined global (and English-speaking) underground audience than a national community of Indonesian speakers. This shift led to the drive for greater comprehensibility described previously and to efforts to promote the Indonesian underground movement as a proudly indigenous enterprise.

Making Indonesian-Language Underground Music: Hazards and Innovation

Pride in the accomplishments of local scenes grew as more and more independently produced cassettes were released and concert events attracted ever-larger crowds. Nevertheless, a university student once commented to me that the group Pas was “brave” (*berani*) in their later albums because they recorded more songs in Indonesian than in English. Singing underground songs in Indonesian was still considered risky in 1997, when that comment was made. Beyond the fact that Indonesian lyrics were far more likely to attract the attention of New Order government censors, singing in Indonesian ran the risk of forfeiting the prestige that came from singing in English and having one’s work rejected because it too closely resembled Indonesian pop music. The Soeharto regime’s lionization of Western knowledge and

Western modernity rendered indigenous popular music inferior and suspect; by singing in Indonesian, one abandoned the pretense that one's music transcended its "backward" national context.

In order to create convincing underground songs in Indonesian, early underground groups had to overcome several obstacles, among them finding the appropriate linguistic register for lyrics. Over the last seven years, a small number of well-known underground bands, including Suckerhead, Pas, and Puppen, have successfully provided models for Indonesian-language underground music composition. These models then became available for other musicians to follow. In particular, the lead singers of these groups excelled in the type of vocal transitions—chants to growls, melodic singing to screaming—that Yukie from Pas identified as initially difficult to execute in Indonesian due to the language's association with less dynamic, slower music. A raspy underground singing style compatible with Indonesian phonology also evolved and was adopted by newer groups.

By 2000, almost all underground bands still recorded at least one English song per cassette, but while these songs once dominated, they were increasingly in the minority. One reason cited by scene participants was that the underground had existed long enough to attract a younger generation of fans, now in high school or college, for whom Indonesian-language underground music was no longer "strange" (*aneh*) and problematic but rather a normal part of the scene.

Post-New Order Politics, Language Choice, and the Underground

In addition to poetic innovation, political changes have also encouraged the rise of Indonesian-language underground music. The veritable explosion of periodicals, slogans, and other publicly circulating discursive forms in the post-Soeharto era representing a range of opinions and orientations from Islamic fundamentalism to feminism has freed the Indonesian language from serving as a mere mouthpiece for an authoritarian regime and from the banal popular culture it encouraged. The post-New Order growth of Indonesian civil society thus contributed to the linguistic indigenization of the musical underground, making the language more available as a language of critique and dissension.

Many bands are still hesitant, however, to write potentially controversial songs in Indonesian. Pas's farewell/good riddance song to ex-president Soeharto, "Blind Majesty," is the only song in English on their fourth album, which was released shortly after the New Order's downfall. The final verse of the song is:

*You turn the page / You wrote the lines / Your book is out / With a bitter end / Anger
goodbye / Is your farewell / Cry my majesty / You will get no time / Goodbye my majesty*

While the meaning of some of the stanzas is somewhat obscure, this song is one of the few examples of a rock text that addresses Soeharto directly (in the second person, no less), and such brazenness is still difficult to imagine in an Indonesian-language song.

Despite a continuing preference for English in some particularly sensitive contexts, it is apparent that the recent democratic transition, in combination with greater mainstream acceptance of underground music, has given greater incentive for Indonesian underground bands to write increasingly bold songs in the national vernacular. A few bands such as Puppen have written aggressive political lyrics in Indonesian. The band's antimilitary song "Hijau" (Green) contains the refrain, "*Hijau seharusnya sejuk*" (Green is supposed to feel cool).¹⁵ According to Arian Tigabelas, Puppen's lead singer and lyricist, "green" is a reference to the Indonesian army, which wears green uniforms.¹⁶ He explained that while green things like leaves and plants are cool and calming to the touch, the army's hot tempers and violent acts during student demonstrations were quite the opposite.

Hijau

*Hijau menindas menekan secara represif / Rebut hak yang terampas, cukup sudah
ketakutan / Hijau menekan, korban pun berjatuhan / Taklah sadar 'lah menuai
bibit-bibit perlawanan? / Rebut, rengkuh, hijau seharusnya sejuk (2x) / Hijau
membungkam, membungkam tanya alasan / Menyebarkan ketakutan, membangun
penjajahan / Hijau menindas, semua ditenggelamkan / Rebut hak yang terampas,
cukup sudah kita tertindas / Rebut, rengkuh, hijau seharusnya sejuk (2x) / Tolak
kehadiranmu, terlampau banyak sakitku / Luka dan derita: hijau seharusnya sejuk
(2x) / Cukup sudah kita tertindas!*

[Green oppresses, pressuring repressively / Snatching away rights that have been trashed,
fear is already enough / Green represses, victims too fall / Aren't they aware that they

have grown the seeds of resistance? / Seizing, tearing, green is supposed to feel cool / Green silences, silences questions why / Spreading fear, developing colonization / Green oppresses, all has been drowned / Snatching rights that have been trashed, we've been oppressed long enough / Seizing, tearing, green is supposed to feel cool / Reject your presence, too great is my pain / Wounds and suffering: green is supposed to feel cool / We have been oppressed long enough!

The lyrics of this song were inspired by the poetry of Arian's classmate and fellow political activist Ade Irawan, and the language employed is indeed poetic, almost literary, despite its strong content. Describing his Indonesian lyrics as a combination of "*puisi*" (poetic) and "*straight to the point*," Arian explained that in "Eastern culture" (*kebudayaan timur*), there exists a greater need for politeness and subtlety, and thus harsh statements must be balanced with poetic indirection. While Puppen songs used to be sung primarily in English, Arian, a university student who speaks English well, asserted that, at present, writing in Indonesian is much easier for him.

Another political song, "Agresi" (Aggression), by Jakartan thrash metal band Suckerhead, expresses the political disillusionment now felt among many Indonesian middle-class youth and exemplifies heavy metal's general preoccupation with condemning official hypocrisy:

Integrasi dalam negeri / Kepentingan diri sendiri / Kontribusi ideologi / Kenyataan hanya teori / Refrain: Hey—katanya demokrasi / Hey—munafik! / Hey—katanya konstitusi / Hey—agresi! / Transformasi informasi / Transparansi diamputasi / Sikut sana sikut sini / Semuanya tidak terkendali / Kompensasi regenerasi / Birokrasi tidak terjadi / Janji-janji, mimpi-mimpi / Halusinasi politisi.

[Integration in the nation / Selfish priorities / Contribution of ideology / Turns out it's only a theory / *Refrain: Hey—they say democracy / Hey—hypocrite! / Hey—they say constitution / Hey—aggression! / Transformation, information / Transparency amputated / Deceiving here, deceiving there / It's all out of control / Compensation, regeneration / Bureaucracy nothing happens / Promises, dreams / Hallucinations of politicians.*

The lyrics to "Agresi" exemplify a more direct lyrical style. Suckerhead's use of Latinate/English cognates (*demokrasi, politisi, amputasi, halusinasi*) allows the song to sound much like those of many Western thrash metal bands, who also string together multisyllabic words for dramatic effect. Suckerhead was one of Indonesia's pioneering thrash metal bands, and its career resembles that of other veteran groups like Puppen and Pas in that the band began recording

songs in English aimed at an international audience but then decided to concentrate on the domestic market. Over the years, Suckerhead's lyrics increasingly addressed specifically Indonesian topics with social commentary and even occasional humor, as in the metal-ska song "Pegawai Negeri" about the difficult life of underpaid, underworked Indonesian civil servants.

Obscenities and Language Choice

Bands have not only started to address political subjects in Indonesian but have also begun to incorporate Standard Indonesian expletives and relatively coarse language into their songs in an attempt to match the vulgarity and shock value of English-language underground music. One of Puppen's most popular songs, "Atur Aku" (Regulate Me), is a defiant statement of personal autonomy and resistance to authority that contains the lines:

Aku tak akan berubah ini / Aku kuatur jalan hidupku, / Keperaaaaaaaaaaaat!

[I will not change this / I, I regulate the way I live my life, / Bastaaaaaaaaaaaaaard!]

"Atur Aku" is a popular song in concert, and fans sing along with the lyrics with gusto, particularly the transgressive final line of the preceding stanza.

Moel, lead singer of the Balinese "*lunatic ethnic grind death metal*" band Eternal Madness, claims he was the first songwriter "brave" enough to use the Indonesian obscenities *bangsat* (scoundrel, SOB) and *brengsek* (worthless, good-for-nothing) in song lyrics.¹⁷ Again we see that courage is required for introducing novel and **potentially** transgressive language into publicly circulating forms. There remains, however, a significant gap between the language of everyday speech and the elevated language of song lyrics. Even the obscene words quoted above are Standard Indonesian—it is difficult to imagine Jakartanese, Sundanese, or Javanese obscenities used in the same fashion, since they are even more vulgar and definitely not intended for public circulation.

The Future of the Underground

The underground scene began in Indonesia with groups of middle school and high school students playing the songs of their Western idols.

This was followed by the formation of bands that wrote their own songs and recorded them. In the most recent phase of the underground's development, the recording of "cover songs" exemplifies the growing self-confidence of veteran Indonesian underground groups. Rather than mimicking the style of their influences, versions of Western songs are recorded in the bands' own distinctive style. Puppen's most recent EP contains a fiery cover of M.O.D.'s "Get a Real Job," while Bandung hardcore group Burger Kill's newest cassette includes a version of 1980s American hardcore group Minor Threat's "Guilty of Being White," the lyrics of which attack white skin privilege in U.S. society. I commented to Arian once that this was an interesting song for an Indonesian band to cover. He laughed and said perhaps the title should be "Guilty of Being Melayu [Malay]!" but added that it was likely the members of Burger Kill just wanted to play their favorite Minor Threat song and weren't terribly concerned about the meaning of the lyrics.

Balcony's 1999 album *Terkarbonasi* (Carbonated) represents a watershed of sorts in the history of the Indonesian underground. Balcony is an "emo-core" (short for "emotional hardcore") group from Bandung that has released three cassettes on Harder Records, an independent label co-owned by members of the band. *Terkarbonasi*, the second of these releases, is extraordinary in several respects. One cover song on the album, a collaboration with Bandung punk group Turtles Jr., is in Sundanese. There are also seven songs in Indonesian and three in English, including a musical collaboration with UcoK from the underground rap group Homicide, entitled "Politics Is Sceptical Hypocrite Imbicilic Trust [*sic*]."

Significantly, the album credits in *Terkarbonasi* are written almost entirely in formal, grammatically correct Indonesian, unusual even in the mainstream Indonesian music business. Instead of the usual "arranged by" or "produced by" credits, the Indonesian words "*diaransir*" and "*diproduseri*" appear in the text. These Indonesian words are of course English cognates, but they are nonetheless recognized terms in Standard Indonesian, and their use in the liner notes conforms to proper Indonesian usage.

The album is extraordinary for reasons other than language: the cassette resembles Puppen's albums more than those of any Western group with regard to production values, musical approach, album graphics, and even the presence of a musical collaboration with Homicide. (Puppen and Homicide together recorded the hardcore/rap/metal song "United Fist" in 1998.) This

may indicate that future Indonesian underground bands will some day acknowledge their peers, rather than Western artists, as their most important influence.

Musical Shifts

While the lyrics and social context of underground music have been indigenized to some extent, musically it tends to stay within the stylistic parameters set by Western artists. This is consistent with the thesis that the writing of lyrics in Indonesian was more an attempt to approximate the Western underground ideal of a music capable of unmediated communication than a desire to "Indonesianize" underground rock. However, many members of rock and underground bands I spoke with did express a willingness to combine Indonesian traditional genres with their music. Despite this, they were generally hesitant about attempting to do so, saying it "had not yet been tried."

Robin Malau, Puppen's guitarist, once mentioned an idea he had for a side project involving the merging of ethnic traditions from all over Indonesia with underground rock. In an E-mail message responding to my query about this project, Robin wrote:

Untuk rekaman mix sama musik etnik ngga tau juga euy, itu kayak mixing chemical kalau salah bisa blow up jadi saya masih belum tahu approach yang ideal buat saya seperti apa, yang pasti saya ngga mau terlalu repot kalau manggung bawain lagu-lagunya, pakai sample kurang keren sedangkan bawa alat-alat musiknya bakalan repot banget, tahu sendiri keadaan gigging di Indonesia seperti apa . . . jadi saya masih belum tahu.

[As for the recording of the *mix* with ethnic music I don't know *euy* (untranslatable colloquial Sundanese particle), it's like *mixing chemicals*, if you make a mistake it can *blow up*, so I don't know yet what the ideal *approach* is. What's certain is I don't want it to be too much of a hassle when playing the songs live, (but) using samples isn't very cool while bringing (traditional) musical instruments (to concerts) would really be a hassle—you yourself know what *gigging* is like in Indonesia . . . so I still don't know yet.]

While most bands seem to have a similarly cautious attitude, at least two underground metal groups, Kremush from Central Java and Eternal Madness from Bali, have successfully blended death and black metal with

elements of traditional music. Whether these groups become trendsetters or remain anomalous remains to be seen.

Most transgressive of all, perhaps, are the handful of campus-based groups that creatively combine underground music (death metal, ska, punk, and others) with *dangdut*, the lowbrow popular music genre that, despite scattered elements of social commentary in the music, middle-class Indonesians consider the epitome of mindless mass entertainment. In a sense, the handful of underground *dangdut* groups are rebelling against underground orthodoxy and its elevation of Western, English-language music over indigenous popular styles. By combining *dangdut* with underground rock, these bands playfully deconstruct the class hierarchy that lies behind such value judgments and begin to confront the elitism of the underground scene. These groups sing in Indonesian, with occasional songs in regional languages.

The Indonesian underground seems quite a long way off from achieving any kind of grand synthesis between “Indonesian” and “Western” music, as genres continue to fragment (newly introduced *aliran* include crustcore, brutal death, and hyperblast) and musical approaches ranging from syncretism to austere purism coexist and compete. At present, each underground band addresses the issue of language choice in its own way—subject, of course, to certain social and artistic constraints, such as the unspoken but strict rule against code switching in underground song lyrics. One veteran Jakarta hardcore group, Straight Answer, recently released a cassette entitled *Straight Answer Is Your Friend* that contains both Indonesian and English songs and includes Indonesian translations of the latter in the liner notes. In the words of one reviewer from a Jakarta-based online underground fanzine:

Sementara bagi mereka yang boten ngertos bahasa Inggris, STRAIGHT ANSWER keliatannya nggak rela juga mempersulit kalian dengan membuka kamus untuk memahami pesan-pesan yang terkandung dalam lagunya. Mereka menyelipkan selebaran fotokopian yang merupakan terjemahan lagu-lagu bahasa Inggris mereka. Cool action, guys.

[Meanwhile for those who *boten ngertos* (“don’t understand” in High Javanese) English, it looks like STRAIGHT ANSWER is not willing to trouble you with opening a dictionary to understand the messages contained in their songs. They’ve slipped in a photocopied page of translations of their English songs. *Cool action, guys.*] (<http://www.bisik.com/underground/RilisAlbumdetail.asp?idw=20>)

The author’s use of High Javanese in this passage is very unusual. While code switching from Indonesian to regional languages is common in fanzine prose, usually more familiar linguistic registers are used. But instead of the Low Javanese *ora ngerti*, the author uses the more refined, polite register in a sentence about the inability to understand a foreign language. This particular instance of code switching appears to be a humorous metacommentary on the relativity of linguistic competence. While the members of Straight Answer and some of their audience may understand English, this is no guarantee they have also mastered the intricacies of High Javanese, which a Solonese or Yogyanese aristocrat is likely to know much better than a Jakartan. Perhaps the reviewer is reminding readers that there is no shame in not understanding English, since it is not the only language of prestige and power for Indonesians. Nevertheless, the entirely predictable use of an English phrase at the end of the passage (“*Cool action, guys*”) underscores the importance of that language in the underground scene, even as it voices the author’s approval of a strategy that allows Indonesian listeners to hear singing in English but also to understand the meaning of the song.

Significantly, the reviewer of Straight Answer’s cassette also questions why the group chose not to include his favorite Straight Answer song, “*Tentara Anjing*” (Dog Troops). The word for “dog,” “*anjing*,” is one of Indonesian’s most powerful obscenities, akin to the English “motherfucker,” and it is likely the band was reluctant to include such a harsh and obscene political song in Indonesian on the album.

Conclusion: Language, Politics, and D.I.Y. Nationalism

The linguistic indigenization of underground music in Indonesia has larger historical ramifications. Indonesian underground artists are participating in a continual and recently renewed debate over the nature of modern Indonesian culture that has gone on since before independence, first in the writings of early nationalists and later, on a much larger scale, on the semiotic battlefield of popular culture (Frederick). As *musik underground* gains popularity in the post-Soeharto era, its influence on how Indonesian youth envision their country and their place in the contemporary world is likely to increase. As this essay has demonstrated, members of the Indonesian

underground value openness to global influences, but they also stress the importance of a unified local and national community. The ability of underground musicians, writers, and fans to reconcile these two ethical imperatives through the creation and reception of aesthetically compelling cultural forms is a considerable achievement.

Furthermore, the case of Indonesian underground music demonstrates that cultural globalization is not merely the play of scapes and the diffusion of Western cultural forms; it is also a series of intimate transformative processes that shape publicly recognized identities and privately felt subjectivities. Current researchers often allude to the link between global media incursions and the transformation of subjectivities, but this link and how it develops are rarely explored in depth with attention to experiential context. Through examining the aesthetic, social, political, economic, and cultural factors that conditioned the shift from English to predominantly Indonesian lyrics in Indonesian underground songs, I have attempted to elucidate how globally circulating cultural forms enter the consciousness of social actors and how actors changed by such encounters may create novel yet related cultural forms that subsequently alter consciousness further, giving rise to new social formations and allegiances (see Urban).

By adapting Indonesian to suit their musical purposes, Indonesian underground musicians created a new voice to enunciate the existential condition of Indonesian youth during a time of social change and political uncertainty. The hybrid musical forms they produced have been sufficiently powerful to consolidate new interpretive communities of Indonesian youth that often transcend deep social, religious, and regional divisions in their society. The emergence of Indonesian-language underground rock music therefore has implications for our understanding of the formation of community and subjectivity in the contemporary world, as it demonstrates not only the creative agency of social actors confronting a changing reality but also the crucial role popular music plays as a site of reconciliation between conflicting cultural and communal allegiances. Rather than disrupt the sense of an integrated modern Indonesian identity, the emergence of a proudly indigenous underground music scene has paradoxically given the concept more credibility in the eyes of its participants in an uncertain and challenging time. Could this then be a case of cultural globalization actually strengthening the hold of the nation-state on the imagination of its citizens?

Acknowledgments

This essay is based on ethnographic research conducted in Indonesia in 1997 and 1999–2000, as well as on Internet research and continuing conversations conducted over E-mail with some of the principal interviewees. I would like especially to thank Wendi Putranto and the members of Cherry Bombshell, Eternal Madness, Step Forward, Slowdeath, Puppen, and Pas for their hospitality, patience, and input. I am also grateful to the Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, for funding the 1997 research and the United States–Indonesia Society for funding my travel to Indonesia in 1999–2000. Thanks are also due to Paul D. Greene, Benedict Anderson, and Sharon Wallach for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.

Notes

1. Throughout the article I italicize all Indonesian terms and commonly used English loanwords. In quoted passages, words and sentences that originally appeared in English are reproduced in italics; English translations from the original Indonesian, Javanese, or other non-English languages are not italicized.

2. According to Clifford Geertz in his classic ethnography *The Religion of Java*, *aliran* was the term Javanese used to describe the different “streams” of Islamic practice in 1950s East Java. The quasi-religious overtones of the underground movement are also apparent in the use of the word “*kiblat*” (literally, toward the direction of Mecca) to describe the musical orientations of underground bands. So a grindcore group like Tengkorak, strongly influenced by the British band Napalm Death, is said “have a *kiblat* toward” (*berkiblat ke*) Napalm Death. One Indonesian fanzine even refers to Ian MacKaye, a punk musician based in Washington, D.C., who became the inspiration for the “straight edge” hardcore movement, as *Nabi* (prophet), a title usually reserved for figures like Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad. More could certainly be said about the similarities between the spread of world religions and the spread of music subcultures to Indonesia, but such a topic lies beyond the scope of this essay.

3. Students have also historically played a crucial role in national politics. Student demonstrations in Jakarta helped bring down the New Order regime, just as they had pushed nationalist leaders to declare independence from Holland in 1945 and hastened the removal of Indonesia’s first president Soekarno from power in the wake of a 1965 coup attempt. Thus, while numerically few and occasionally the object of envy by the impoverished majority, students in Indonesia have long been at the vanguard of social and political change.

4. As in many other underground contexts, “hardcore” and “punk” are considered separate genres, despite their historical connection. The former genre tends to be more musically complex and eclectic, while the latter adheres closely to the musical template created by bands such as the Exploited and the Sex Pistols. Death metal and black metal also differ with regard to songs’ subject matter, stage presentation, and musical approach, the latter far more likely to incorporate mythological and occult themes.

5. According to Waters, "A globalized culture admits a continuous flow of ideas, information, commitment, values, and tastes mediated through mobile individuals, symbolic tokens, and electronic simulations" (126). He defines cultural globalization as the processes by which the world is brought closer to this idealized state. The globalizing processes that brought underground music to Indonesia have not eliminated long-standing asymmetries in cultural flows but certainly have contributed to the rise of a borderless underground music community that now includes many parts of the world far from the geographical origins of the music, including Indonesia.

6. Useful accounts of the history and development of Indonesian national popular music can be found in Hatch, Lockard, Lysloff, Manuel, and Piper and Jabo. For an account of the cultural dynamics of the 1980s mainstream pop music scene that discusses the importance of incorporating Western influences, see Siegel (201–31). Sen and Hill discuss the burgeoning popularity in the 1990s of "disorderly" rock music, including underground genres, in their study of media and politics in Indonesia. They state erroneously, however, that English lyrics are "increasingly common among underground bands" (177), an assertion that most likely results from their failure to distinguish older commercial Indonesian rock bands like Boomerang and Slank (which for commercial reasons have always recorded songs in Indonesian) from the true underground, indie label bands that constitute the subject of this essay.

7. In fact, the term "underground" had been in use in Indonesia since the 1970s to refer to locally performed Western-style hard rock music (Franki Raden, pers. comm.). There is no evidence, however, that the music of this period became the basis for an extensive grassroots network dedicated to the independent production and distribution of recordings, as occurred in the 1990s.

8. One of the most celebrated of these is 40.I.24 Studio located in the Sukasenang neighborhood in Bandung, where nearly every local band has recorded at one time or another. For most of its history, the studio's main tape machine was an eight-track cassette recorder.

9. Some clarification about my use of the phrase "major label" is in order here. In Indonesian underground discourse, "major label" refers to any large for-profit record company. This includes those companies that, in American terminology, would be classified as "independent" labels because they are not owned and operated by transnational multimedia giants such as Sony or BMG. Branches of these conglomerates do operate in Indonesia, but national recording companies like Musica, Virgo Ramayana, and Aquarius remain important players in the Indonesian music market. Underground scene members generally do not distinguish between national and transnational recording companies. They reserve the term "independent" or "indie" for the small, grassroots, D.I.Y. labels run by their peers.

10. Why this crackdown never occurred is unclear, given the New Order's history of suppressing dissent and censoring popular culture (see Yampolsky). Most likely, the underground scene was too small to attract the government's attention, and, as will be discussed, the preponderance of English lyrics in underground songs appeared to limit the reach of the music's politically subversive aspects to a small, and elite, minority.

11. The Indonesian language is closely related to the Malay dialects spoken in Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore and by large minority populations in neighboring Southeast Asian nations. Combined with these speech communities, Indonesian Malay is part of a world language with more than 200 million speakers (Collins xxi). Addressing the increasing influence of English in the Malay-speaking world, linguist James Collins writes:

It is a curious artifact of history that Malay and English, languages which are about the same age and which have a documented history of literacy also roughly parallel in age, now meet in Southeast Asia as competitors. But, then, Malay has competed

before with major languages and has emerged enriched and more powerful from the experience. (86)

12. The multiregistered nature of language use in Indonesian is exemplified by its array of pronominal options. Indonesian speakers have a choice between at least three different first person singular pronouns when referring to themselves; which is chosen depends on a number of contextual factors. The polite, neutral pronoun "saya" is normally used when speaking with older people and persons whom one does not know well. The informal, confessional, and poetic pronoun "aku" is used in somewhat more relaxed settings, but with intimates one usually either uses a "low" register of a regional language or the Jakartanese "gua" or "gue." Almost all Indonesian songwriters, including those in the underground, use "aku" or the shortened literary form "ku" in their lyrics.

Second person singular pronouns are even more complex: the Jakartanese "lu" is considered very coarse; the informal "kamu" and "kau" are used more often. The latter two pronouns, along with the poetic form "engkau," appear most often in song lyrics. The use of the capitalized formal second person pronoun "Anda" is usually restricted to highly formal situations and impersonal forms of communication such as signs and advertisements; in most polite speech between nonintimates, second person pronouns are avoided as much as possible.

13. The fact that underground rock musicians tend to aspire to certain level of musical seriousness and profundity is one reason why they rarely use regional languages in their songs. Indonesian hip hop lyrics, in contrast, are often comical and lighthearted in tone and frequently contain Betawi, Javanese, and Sundanese expressions. Nonstandard Indonesian and codeswitching in song lyrics therefore generally signals humorous or satirical intent, which is relatively unusual in Indonesian underground rock.

14. Any doubts I may have had about the possibility of investing emotionally in music sung in a foreign language were dispelled as I found myself becoming an ardent fan of several Indonesian popular music groups during the course of my research.

15. The phrase literally means "green should be cool." The gloss used here is based on Arian's own suggestion when I E-mailed him a draft of my translation of the song.

16. The Bandung hardcore band Injected recorded a similar song entitled *Coklat* (Brown), a reference to the color of the uniforms of the national police. The lyrics (originally in Indonesian) are somewhat less "poetic" than Puppen's and include the lines:

Coklat, coklat oppresses people / Although sweet, what's sweet is still hated / Coklat, coklat is pigfaaaaaaced [bermuka babiiiiiiiiiiii!]

17. For more on the music of Eternal Madness, see Wallach.

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At the Crossroads of Languages, Musics, and Emotions in Kathmandu

—Paul D. Greene and David R. Henderson

Westernization is not a term with which we are especially comfortable. Neither is modernization.¹ Yet in discussing the connections between music, language, and social change in Kathmandu, Nepal, we are unable to ignore these terms, for versions of them have been traced out time and again for us in conversations and interviews with Nepali pop musicians and their audiences.² How do the sounds and senses of Nepali pop, rock, and "sentimental" music index particular kinds of social change? We take one emotional register—which we can loosely denote as one which encompasses romantic love, longing, and desire—and examine how the linguistic and musical choices that Nepali pop musicians make articulate particular ways of loving, longing, and desiring.³ Language choice—by which we mean not just the languages people choose, but the ways people choose to use language—also implies an ideology of emotion in which some ways of expressing feeling are privileged over others. Sung expressions of love and desire likewise inspire listeners to imagine this emotional register, and their own experiences with it, in novel ways. Moreover, the ways young musicians and listeners in the Kathmandu Valley express sentiments like love and desire can be turned into broader critiques of what they perceive as typically Nepali ways of doing things.

Kathmandu is a city of remarkable cultural diversity and vitality. Once situated at a lucrative intersection of trade between India and Tibet, it has in recent decades become a busy crossroads of world tourism. While the ethnographies of the 1800s and early 1900s often represented the intersections of Newars, Tamangs, Sherpas, Gurungs, and other groups of Nepal with Indians, Tibetans, and other foreigners as a vibrant cultural mix of diverse peoples,