

“Layar Kumendhung” and the Promise of the Beloved: Aesthetics and Anthropological Inquiries

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Lembaran Antropologi [Volume 4, No. 2, Year 2025] highlights key themes of aesthetic narrative as anthropological knowledge and debates on art forms from within anti-colonial methodology and a decolonial perspective.¹ This special issue aims to present and contextualize these themes, fostering critical engagement with theory, discourse, and practice in creative imagination in anthropology. In this special edition, the scope focuses on examining cultural practices and on reading the human, the non-human, objects (material), subjects, agency, and the cartography of relationality. *Lembaran Antropologi* invites readers to view these complex relationships as opportunities for discovery and critical understanding, emphasizing their importance for scholars and students engaged in decolonial thought and aesthetics.

However, as a practitioner of dance and believe that the epistemology of embodiment (bodily experience and continuously seeking, as a way of critical knowing) and influenced by oral history from dance guru(s) and their traditional symbolic knowledge, I trace historiography as an active method of seeking knowledge (archive) or within language of Sam Moyo et al's diversity of the new struggle,² it is a chart of political commitment. I support the role of cultural practitioners, recognizing their vital role in fostering knowledge that values aesthetics as an intersectional form of knowledge production and community resilience.

I, as editor for this special issue, place my "curatorial conscience" in the politics of knowledge, such as genres of unwanted technique as ways of knowing about necro politics and taboo subjects, the need for ecology, delinking, and genres that formulate a signal of agrarian political economy and geopolitics in cultural practices. With a specific focus on performance, particularly within Indonesia, the “elite” highly educated and economically privileged, correlate and intervene meaning and technique (Ministry of Culture and Higher Education in Arts, for example), yet reveal uncovers broader phenomena and limits Samir Amin's idea of the politics of transferring state power. In Indonesia, persistent surveillance

1 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1961); Mahmood Mamdani, “Decolonizing the Political Community,” in *Neither Settler nor Native* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674249998-007>.

2 Sam Moyo, Paris Yeros, and Praveen Jha, “Imperialism and Primitive Accumulation: Notes on the New Scramble for Africa,” *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 1, no. 2 (2012): 189, <https://doi.org/10.1177/227797601200100203>.

and control are maintained through state mechanisms and social networks rooted in the New Order era, making them difficult to dismantle.

Here, art forms become intertwined with neoliberalism³ and are also often an extension of necropolitics. Inspired by Ana Tsing's theorization of "enable entanglement"⁴ in marking labor of women in speculative value and also Kuan-Hsing Chen's decolonial epistemology, I translate the specific curiosity toward a more mundane context to seek and build potential regional collaboration beyond this writing (such as a critical engagement with why workers in Indonesia accepted to work in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, versus Malaysia. Alternatively, why is contemporary engagement with art forms, the reference (plantation and dance, for example), readable at a place with a shared colonial history and yet not necessarily understood, instead the critical engagement is legible for metropole desire? Here, the metropole tastes the arts of the global south and reflects on coloniality. Here, we see what Frantz Fanon proposes (decolonial) and how Angela Davis's nostalgia⁵ as a critique of [dis] embodiment, guides us in thinking about arts practice that reappears somewhere beyond borders.⁶

So, my own inquiries then are not only what happened with dance form when land has been dispossessed by corporate, but what and how the form reappears and in what context, or how and why migrant workers are dancing, but precisely what type of relationality of power enables that, or how certain superstructures are involved. This includes when we dealt with music, or instruments that produce sound beyond local liberation of listening, but also what regional assemblages and entanglements toward borders and leisure in "neoliberal time" of listening are possible, and how to frame such questions as a form of specific intersectionality in the study of transnational, gender, and praxis. For example, in this special edition, Nurdiyanto et al.'s "*horeg*" offers an ethnography of sound and highlights the importance of class politics, fostering a sense of collective social awareness. *Horeg* provides a seductive imagination of sound and the rhythm of social movement. However, the author has warned us about the tactic of "cooptation" (my wording) as what Karen Ho calls "managing the margin"⁷ in accumulation, unpredictable and yet present as a part of the small scale in the capitalist script. In the author's wording, "*horeg*" is a state

3 Rachmi Diyah Larasati, "Desiring the Stage: The Interplay of Mobility and Resistance," in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres*, ed. Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra Nielsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137035608_17.

4 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Enabling Entanglements," in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548-001>.

5 Angela Y. Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 37–45, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448739>.

6 Roderick A. Ferguson, "Authoritarianism and the Planetary Mission of Queer of Color Critique: A Short Reflection," *Safundi* 21, no. 3 (2020): 282–290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2020.1773632>.

7 Karen Ho, "Commentary on Andrew Orta's 'Managing the Margins': The Anthropology of Transnational Capitalism, Neoliberalism, and Risk," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 1 (2014): 31–37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027560>.

"miniature." I wonder if Samin Amir would theorize about delinking in this context?

Or how does the war on Palestine⁸ and Iran guide us in forming an aesthetic conscience in class-socioeconomic terms, including the theorization of the politics of space, dispossession, class struggle, and sound as an exteriority of life? Spatial village ruins, urbanism, refugee, and the instrumentality of crossing race, and on how economic borders (trafficking, displacement) still follow the logic of colonial and economic liberation? Or reaffirm a new genre of empire and therefore understanding regional decolonial is worth pursuing?⁹

In this special edition, the site and argument for the contributor are eclectic, not necessarily guided by a keyword, and follow the analysis and idea I have shared. I am aware that some are free-flow interpretations of keywords—for example, in terms of decolonial authors who mostly engage with Walter Dignolo.¹⁰ Alternatively, Sekar Sari proposes a gentle analysis of how "care" is a form of discourse and aesthetic potential. The legibility of "care" as a new terrain within cinema and dance studies is a technical challenge for me, as it calls into question how potential empathy is mobilized to reaffirm their craft as a form of cinematic craft as an aesthetic power. It is a mediated call, or potential solidarity in the shape of the key wording that Sekar Sari uses: seen and unseen, expression of grief and care.

As an editor, I have a specific limitation in seeing "care" in the most [un]accessible bodily movement and expression of pain.¹¹ I grew up in a village, and when I engaged with cinema, I centered my thinking on the aesthetics of the machine and the filmmaker's sensibility for technique. The unseen, as post-human, and care, as village life, are rooted outside that machinery, although I see the potential. It reminded me of a work on Josephine Baker and Katherine Dunham that clearly visualizes the anthropology of race and racialized pain. In Sekar's work, universalizing pain and grief are proposed through dance and film. Therefore, including these differences in how authors engage their work here aims to honor them and foster a sense of freedom, scholarship, critical community, and further dialogue on theory.

Like dancing, the projection of 'walking to the forest' as Anna Tsing proposes, as an optional method for seeking unpredictable knowledge, invites readers to embrace openness to differences in how they use theory. Alternatively, in a call for solidarity, Oviyandi Emnur and RD Larasati's visual anthropology and narrative trace a question of neglect by the state, a punishment, and ghostly extraction¹² as Tania Li and Pujo Semedi write, a hint of tragedy,

8 Anaheed Al-Hardan, *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7312/al-h17636>.

9 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smwwj>.

10 Walter D. Dignolo, "Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing on (De)coloniality, Border Thinking and Epistemic Disobedience," *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 3 (2011): 273–283, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2011.613105>.

11 Veena Das and Clara Han, *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1xxwdf>.

12 Emily Mitamura and Rachmi Diyah Larasati, "Bodies that Haunt: Rethinking the Political Economy of Racialised Death," *Cultural Studies* 39, no. 6 (2025): 811–826, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2025.2488888>.

neglect, and abandonment of the forest.¹³

The particular argument in this volume marks Anthropology and the mode of imagination as a form of human decision-making, a creative aesthetic craft, and a response to livelihoods, grief, care, and social inequalities. These insights aim to inform practical approaches in policy, cultural preservation, and social activism. It demonstrates the real-world relevance of anthropological imagination and encourages scholars and students to consider how aesthetic practices can influence social and political realities.

The work of Anastasia Melati with workers in Taiwan, as both aesthetics in the spatial labor politics analysis and the seeking of a meaning of time through leisure, longing, and the performance of identity, a mediation between self, family, state (in Indonesia) and work environment (another structural of law and state and community: Taiwan) as transnational affective labor. The craft of aesthetics and the arts as a form of knowledge translation, in this edition, are reflected in writing that captures the symbolic order of the non-human and guides value through the mythical being of *merak* and *reog*, and through animalistic embodiment in *reog's* figurative exteriority. However, this secret value and knowledge are transcending into a new economic script of livelihood, which includes tourism conveyed through "festival" and the state's ceremonial.

Nursilah et al. are also particularly engaged with the creative economy and its relation to aesthetics, which are often categorized as *tari rakyat* (folk dance) and addressed from marginalized positions (non-palatial culture), driven by a critical stance toward the creative economy rather than the capitalist script. Both authors, perhaps in this edition's wording, delink the state; for *reog*, however, the originality of symbolic post-human knowledge and difference from workers in Taiwan ritual time are recreated. In terms of the study material, it contributes to the discussion of time in development (*reog*) toward more capitalist agenda which examines the revalue relationship between human and non-human agencies (flora, fauna, and the surrounding environment, including village and urbanism) and how these multispecies relations are represented in specific registers and sources of artistic imagination and their forms, appear in tourism ecology.

The attention to dance choreography and the translation of music composition for the intimate, familial event that spills beyond the wall into music festivals, the translation of Western partiture into different parts of the narrative of "love" within heteronormative structure, and the effort to ungendered impulses of sound were the hard parts in my curatorial. The authors also convey analyses of "inspirations" rather than (if it is my interpretation) of the empire: Western Canon. However, the hidden power of composition, the bodily participation of the author Gutami Hayu Pangastuti, as I cannot hear when I read, becomes a source of my editorial experimentation in this series and Pangastuti's argument about the Dutch role in the creation of scale, notation, and partiture. I rely on the persistence of description in how the author crafts an argument for improvisation as aesthetic resistance and critique of the colonial (state) structure.

The edition captures the author's intervention, foregrounding religiosity as a critical decentering and spatial choreography as an aesthetic potential, written by Katia Chaterji

0.1080/09502386.2025.2527038.

13 Tania Murray Li and Pujo Semedi, *Plantation Life: Corporate Occupation in Indonesia's Oil Palm Zone* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

and Susas Rita Loravianti. This writing conveys a new terrain of conversation, looking at decolonial aesthetics as restructuring meaning and order (state) to trace a moment of faith and celebration in the act of claiming innovation, and yet negating intercultural encounter between both an event guided by a religious literary festival (MTQ) or spatial sound, narrative (West Sumatra's Muslim poetics textuality).

Lembaran Antropologi special edition has invited authors to contribute their critical interpretations of the interrelation between daily life as a specific site of time in anthropology and cultural practice that negates human behaviors, imagination, and their aesthetic craft. Anthropological discourses and their encounters with different fields include visual, dance, labor, and gender.¹⁴ For this particular edition, I add a new section to the ordinary note, with wording inspired by Christina Sharpe, a gender and cultural theorist who argues that the human conscience influences material historiography, and by Lisa Lowe,¹⁵ who urges us to take note toward universalizing empire taste. For this particular list, we are very inspired to engage with interviews by Ariawan and Nursalim. The powerful point in this writing is an acknowledgment of seeking meaning, which is also the editor's take on knowledge production, unresolved. Yadi, who crafts Kadedek instruments, as a signal of knowledge that engages with material culture, and provokes thinking on speculative value, aesthetics, sound, and more about indigeneity politics. It was captured by his question on reciprocity. As an artist from Borneo, Yadi's aesthetic craft highlights the importance of indigeneity politics and cultural innovation as a method of resilience. Ariawan travels to Malaysia (Kuching) and notes the cultural link and its paradox of the periphery as geography yet a center in the global spatial order, forming new value, while also marking transnationalism in Malay and indigeneity, as well as in forest culture. Not only that, Ariawan and Yadi have placed the work and the curatorial in critical thinking on archives and critical material studies as Southeast Asia geopolitics. The unique point of this writing is an acknowledgment of seeking meaning, which is also the editor's take on knowledge production: unresolved.

Another photo essay (Rahmadi Himawan), that embraces entrepreneurship and aesthetic practice, appears in the work that traces *campursari*. Gendered practice yet conveys class and cultural placement in the capital city, marking the transient space and its identity in Indonesia's capital. Traditional artists are examining *campursari* as less refined aesthetics, yet it requires contemporaneity. This includes song and dance. A site of knowledge, marking a different hierarchy of transmission that mark the engagement with *wayang* and cultural sites as a form of symbolic wealth and cosmologies of the a epistemology in Javanese as a geographic of identity belonging¹⁶, has also been captured by Meysyah Nastiya. This connection highlights how the posthuman and art practices resonate with epistemology for them and serve as examples of traditionality and interdisciplinary analysis, opening a

14 Christina Sharpe, "Ordinary Notes," *BOMB* 163 (2023): 57–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27308279>.

15 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw8zh>.

16 Sumarsam, *The in-Between in Javanese Performing Arts: History and Myth, Interculturalism and Interreligiosity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2024).

new method for detailed, yet-to-the-point, decolonial analysis.

In the film notes, Kusumaningtyas invites us to view a Malaysian film as a case study of cultural borders and social themes, offering a glimpse into spatial youth and girlhood amid bodily transformation and gendered identity, and their connection to social knowledge and its burdens, all within a capitalist framework. Through photography, theatre, music, wayang, gender analysis, capitalist culture, spatial memory, industry, class, urban life, and changing regulation of time and place as cultural identity, the conversation on non-human entities as socio-political critique is expanded.

This edition then features innovative interdisciplinary methodologies—such as visual analysis, performative practices, and multispecies ethnography—designed to inspire scholars to explore new perspectives and sustain vibrant critical dialogues in the field. These approaches, though unfamiliar to some, are crucial for expanding analytical frameworks and encouraging active participation and contribution to ongoing debates across borders, regions, and disciplines. They aim to deepen understanding and foster innovative scholarship in decolonial anthropology and aesthetic studies.

To conclude, here is a fragmented text from a song, and I dedicate it to the dancers of *Gandrung* and *Seblang*. Their performance was once unwanted, their knowledge was banned, and now the replication has become an accumulation of invisible labor, dance, and masses, what Amber Musser calls "excess and formless."¹⁷ This signals a complicity of erasure, the unseen.

Like the title of this introduction, “Layar Kumendhung”, a song from the Banyuwangi region, invites us to open the horizon of openness in knowledge seeking, because the “layar”, “a spatial scene like ‘wayang’, is already Kumendhung: a shadow, a ghost, and foggy, yet unclear. It is a pattern of knowledge and human vulnerability, a grief, a power, and another grief.

“It is a promise to the beloved, an ocean, the arrival of “...”
on a ride in a special carriage.
Please be awake, be awake [of knowledge] despite it is raining ..., and please be here...
coming to the earth, grounded.”

– Kuala Lumpur, 2026.

17 Amber Jamilla Musser, “Excess and Formlessness,” *Qui Parle* 34, no. 1 (2025): 69–81, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-11701006>.

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