

The Question of Decoloniality in Philippine Music History

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Today, decoloniality (and its cognate “decolonisation”) is often reduced to a post-colonial desire for the pre-colonial: for culture, language, and ways of knowing untainted by the colonial rulers’ influence. Although I do not fully subscribe to Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò’s characterisation of this desire to decolonise “anything and everything” as a craze that does not deliver much¹, I am nonetheless hesitant to invoke it in my own work. As a music historian, especially of the Philippines in its transition period from a Spanish to a United States colony in the early twentieth century, examples abound of how colonialism erased autochthonous cultures, a reality that consistently provokes anger and indignation in how I think and write about history. But does colonialism explain everything? Is it such a totalising force that there is nothing else but to incessantly call out its constitutive power in our retelling of the past?

For Filipino scholars, coloniality is a given and not something that one needs to be made aware of as if the colonial empire had been hidden. To make sense of music during the colonial period (and in the post-colony) is to behold beautiful hybrids not always for its uniqueness of sound but for its remarkable adaptability to tell the messy, complex, and ordinary struggles of Filipinos. The Philippine zarzuela (*sarsuwela* in the Tagalog language), for example, means many things for its creators, practitioners, and audiences, both past and present. There are works in various regional languages that are explicitly nationalist and anti-colonial, others are less concerned about the coloniser-colonised relationship than with addressing the plight of the poor and the working class. As a representational form, the *sarsuwela* stage was also not immune to the exoticist tendencies of European repertoire in its fantastical othering of minority cultures in the service of constructing a national identity. To read *sarsuwelas* uncritically only for its subversive and anticolonial significance is to again impose the expectation of colonial difference onto Filipino imagination and creativity.

While the historian in me takes the irrevocability of coloniality as material fact, there are notable archival and creative projects that hold the potential for decolonial redress or, at least, aspire for better futures. The [Decolonizing Southeast Asian Sound Archives](#)², for example, is committed to cultural repatriation and accessible and community-driven heritage curation. Theatre scholar and playwright Nicanor Tiongson’s *sarsuwela* adaptations and reimagining of historical revolutionary figures remind contemporary audiences of present-day injustices as much as the tragedies of the past. We may never fully escape the spectre of the colonial, but we continue to wrestle with the question of how decoloniality might look like in practice.

1 Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst & Company, 2022).

2 This was a multi-year EU-funded transnational research project. See www.decoseas.org.

About the author

Isidora Miranda received her Ph.D. in Musicology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and currently teaches at Vanderbilt University. Her research on the performance of zarzuelas and operas in the Philippines and its construction of racial and gendered identities during the U.S. colonial period has been supported by various grants including the Mellon Fellowship for Dissertation Research in Original Sources and the American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship. Her article entitled “Creative Authorship and the Filipina Diva Atang de la Rama” for the *Journal of Musicological Research* was awarded the journal’s inaugural Kauffman Prize in 2023. She currently serves as an affiliate for BORN and as an associate editor of *Musika Jurnal*, a publication of the University of the Philippines’ Center for Ethnomusicology. Isidora is also a violinist, having performed in a variety of ensembles including the Manila Symphony Orchestra, the Julstrom String Quartet, the klezmer act Gasn Duo, the Brazilian music group Forró Fo Sho, and the NIRMA (Nashville Immigrant and Refugee Music & Arts) Project.