

Preface: Decolonising Music and Music Studies

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All this new noise

Decolonisation is a *cause célèbre* that has been making the rounds on the agenda of an increasing number of universities in recent years, with rising staff consciousness and changing student demographics/ demands encouraging institutions to address overlooked narratives and silenced perspectives within still-operating systems of structural oppression. While many decolonial efforts have been undertaken actively in North America and Australia, and in departments of history, political science and sociology, increasingly in the United Kingdom, music departments are slowly, if sometimes reluctantly, seeking to address epistemological shifts in their very structures of existence. These exertions have ranged from questioning the *raison d'être* behind knowledge-building itself in an idealised (and unattainably) equal world, to curriculum reviews both superficial and extensive. Polite panel discussions have been organised alongside the rearing up of fiery messages channelling #RhodesMustFall campaigns on mailing lists, blogs, podcasts and vociferous social media platforms led by younger student voices—with social media becoming platforms crucial for the decolonisation of narratives and methodologies themselves, particularly in the affordance of spaces to both marginalised voices and thinkers who choose not to speak in, for want of a better word, potentially elite language styles of ‘academese’.¹ Tackling day-to-day anxieties

¹ See the recent discussions on the SEM-L mailing list over the period of June–August 2020, and also posts on closed Facebook Group Decolonizing Ethnomusicology from June–August 2020. See also moving Twitterfeed textscape for #decolonizing music, and the following websites: <https://projectspectrummusic.com/>, <https://decolonizingthemusicroom.com/>, <https://www.nateholdermusic.com/>, [all accessed 1 November 2020]

of ‘politically correct’ versus ‘triggering’ discussions in classrooms of morphing and differently-privileged participants as well as teachers, has stepped up from the generic to the targeted. More specifically in the COVID-hit month of June 2020, the global fallout of the not-unrelated #BlackLivesMatter movement (henceforth #BLM), returned with renewed energy following protests against the murder of George Floyd, led to an increased call for actions on all academic and societal fronts.² An intervention was made by scholar-musician-activist Danielle Brown, whose open letter to ethno/musicologists on her blog ‘My People Tell Stories’ and to the mailing list of the Society for Ethnomusicology³ exposed the long-unsaid but widely-known reality: that systemic racism is embedded within the field in small and large degrees; that academia itself (including ethnomusicology) remains a neocolonial enterprise—by dint of its default setup of (often, BIPOC/ Black & Global Majority [henceforth BGM]) research informants as secondary inputs to the careers of (often, tenured, elite and white) scholars in established institutions.⁴

That decolonisation is caught up in uproar, debate, activism and necessary institutional change is clear enough. But can (or will) it be incorporated into the periodisation of musical epistemologies *à la* modernism, postmodernism or the still-trendy ‘awakenings’ brought about by queer theory and posthumanist thinking and pedagogies? What are the differences between decolonising music, decolonising ethnomusicology and decolonising the

² See Alexander Douglas’ contribution in this issue.

³ ‘An Open Letter on Racism in Music Studies’. Danielle Brown, June 12 2020. <https://www.mypeopletellstories.com/blog/open-letter>, last accessed Sept 7 2020.

⁴ Various terms, from POC/ BIPOC (Persons of Colour/ Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) largely used in the United States to BAME/ BME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic BME/Black and Minority Ethnic) and BBIPOC (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian People of Colour) in the UK have been used to designate communities of colour. In this article, I use both the better known BIPOC label and the more accurate BGM (Black & Global Majority) which addresses and flips the erroneous notion that persons of colour belong to a statistical minority in a global context, even as their access to wealth and opportunity is grossly under-equivalent). I also specifically capitalise ‘B’ and ‘I’ in specific reference to Black and Indigenous communities as a mark of respect. For a detailed critique of ethnicity taxonomies, see Alexander Douglas’ article in this issue and also his blogpost, <https://alexanderdouglas.info/2021/05/07/a-critique-of-ethnicity-taxonomies/>, accessed May 26 2021.

academy itself (including its human constituents)? Who gets to decide? Does musical decolonisation look different in the proverbial Global South as opposed to the Global North—and where does transnationalism link the two up? Can we decolonise decolonisation itself, as Yarmimar Bonilla (2020) asks?⁵ Is decolonisation a by-word for broader anti-racist campaigns in music studies? How can these conversations take place without degenerating into unhelpful binaries of Culture Wars-led identity politics?

As I write from within the UK, a panel discussion on the very subject—including the place of class—was convened by the Asian Music Unit at the Music Department at Goldsmiths, University of London,⁶ while global calls for dialogues on the same theme, in non-traditional formats, are being made by the International Council for Traditional Music.⁷ Earlier in July 2020 in the thick of an (ongoing) pandemic, several hundred interested parties from timezones around the world congregated online to engage in deep dialogue and activism on Decolonising The Musical University,⁸ the second event of its kind organised by a team from the University of Edinburgh. Across the sector, calls for/ discussions around decolonisation or diversification of curricula on public and/ or private fora have been made at institutions deemed ‘traditional’ and/ or ‘elite’ in the popular imagination, ranging from Oxford and Cambridge to the Associated Board for the Royal Schools of Music.⁹ At the same

⁵ Bonilla, Yarmimar. 2020. With Ryan C. Jobson. Public Thinker: Yarmimar Bonilla on Decolonizing Decolonization, *Public Books*. <https://www.publicbooks.org/public-thinker-yarmimar-bonilla-on-decolonizing-decolonization/>, accessed 3 November 2020.

⁶ Music Panel: Decolonising Music. <https://www.gold.ac.uk/calendar/?id=13316>, last accessed 7 September 2020. See also video recording <https://vimeo.com/469503335>, last accessed 22 November 2020.

⁷ <http://www.ictmusic.org/dialogues2021>, last accessed 23 November 2020.

⁸ Decolonising the Musical University website, University of Edinburgh. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/edinburgh-college-art/reid-school-music/decolonising-musical-university>, last accessed 7 September 2020.

⁹ See for example petition run by the Musician’s Union, <https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/ABRSM-Diversify>, last accessed Sept 7 2020. Also petition run initiated by Grace Healy and documented by Musicians’ Union, <https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/Home/News/2020/Jun/Decolonialising-the-Music-Curriculum-Sign-the-Peti>, last accessed Sept 7 2020.

time, backlash responses have quickly arisen, openly and behind closed doors, in the form of anonymous anti-decolonial petitions and private email chains targeting and boycotting the work of alleged activists.¹⁰ Yet more sub-conversations about crises of ‘trendy wokeness’ (now turned into an ironic descriptor) and performative allyship on social media have muddied the waters in a swirl of discussions. These have arisen alongside intersectional demographic splits in BIPOC/BGM) communities themselves, over fears of counterattacks and loss of precariously-gained ground/good faith/‘polite’ discussion spaces alongside white-aligned privileges that show up fissures brought about through shadism, colourism and class politics.

***Ethnomusicology Forum*’s new conversation space: frank and brutal stories**

In trying to create a published academic space that can platform frank and brutal dialogues grounded in lived and practical experience, and in deliberate avoidance of polarising rhetoric made in the name of ‘Race-vs-Class Wars’, the following series of reflections in this issue of *Ethnomusicology Forum* have been rounded up as a special collection of short to mid-length essays. These pieces of writing are featured in our journal’s new alternative format introduced in 2018 and dedicated to the presentation of topical and evolving conversations on the discipline. Crucially, they are penned by authors from diverse positionalities, backgrounds and marginalities. This issue begins with a call to action via subversion of the field in thought and writing by Alexander Douglas, a b/Black philosopher and musician based in the UK. Following this, three candid takes from the framework of praxis and on-the-ground negotiations in applied decolonial work at the International Library of African Music in South Africa appear, through thickly-descriptive contributions by Lee Watkins, Boudina

¹⁰ Examples of these include Twitter-based campaigns and spin-offs of the ‘Musicians Against Woke Ideology’ movement, as well as (to this author’s knowledge) one secret closed-group email chain in the UK in an elite university.

McConnachie and Elijah Madiba. A fifth piece by Javier Rivas Rodríguez provides the student's voice 'from below', bringing the concept of 'care' into attempts at interrogating inclusivity in music studies as a separate discussion from equality and diversity. This is followed by an evaluation of Irish musical pedagogy as seen from the positionality of postcolonial Indian Ocean contexts by Karishmeh Felfeli-Crawford, who examines the positional usefulness of analysis today (including the recently-incendiary Schenkerian method). Yet another perspective from South Africa, this time expanded in a longer and insightful consideration of white and female pedagogical authority, is provided by Marie Jorritsma. In this article, she argues for more compassionate ethnomusicology that eschews narrow and polarised discourses on race-determined control of music curricula. Writing from Latin America, the symbolic 'origin' of decolonisation as a theoretical framework, Raúl Renato Romero provides a short memoir of his experiences in neocolonial Peruvian musical institutions of higher learning. Finally, I provide a closing view on intersectional approaches, via personal stories recounted through my vantage point as a transnational and postcolonial Singaporean (Chinese) ethno/musicologist.

As the titles and summaries suggest, individual entries are presented in diverse narrative styles ranging from urgent call-outs to quiet reflections and shows of open vulnerability. Even in articles from apparently similar vantage points in this special issue, the conclusions can be different. But therein lies a point: decolonisation cannot be reduced to a single approach; if anything, multiple re-voicings are part of its processes of upheaval, change, activism and re-engagement. Further, shifts in tectonic plates of global power have been amplified by new technological landscapes now dramatically altered by the ramping up of virtual communications in the thick of COVID-19, leaving formerly colonised states still battling inherited legacies of oppression even as they have also become new colonisers (in the case of China for example).

Decolonisation is messy and always situational. It is often conducted with ambivalence alongside hope, compromise and vulnerability in the need to go off-piste and rogue. It requires willingness to learn and bounce back from mistakes. It is always a work-in-progress, and as much about learning how to find and shape voices-in-the-making even as it is about reclaiming stolen platforms. Decolonisation is not a simple matter of returning to primitivism or a simplistic overthrowing of powers in the binary—whether of ‘the West’ by ‘the East’ or of ‘the North’ by ‘the South’—but about how a search for equal playing fields across the world necessitates the recognition of colonial trauma unevenly passed down (and sometimes unwittingly reified) through the experiences of multiple generations. Situational and newer politico-economic privileges (and fragilities) have emerged in intersectional ways among the formerly colonised who still live within frameworks of coloniality (and in many cases have no choice but to hold onto minimal privileges—language; governance systems; religion—left behind by colonisers). Multiple, distributed agencies, micro-activisms and conversations are part of the paradigms. These are sometimes overlapping; other times not quite but almost intersecting, and yet other times at cross-purposes.

Often, the deliberate attempt to be reflexive and truthful—seen in many heartfelt testimonies in this issue—can be fraught exercises in self-flagellation and/ or the exposure of openness to attack. Minefields are aplenty: in writing about ourselves in our academic contexts there is the side effect of ‘friendly fire’ upon colleagues we respect (or not) in our immediate workplaces. In taking a stance itself on navel gazing and a tougher position on inherited structures of power and opportunity, we risk the wrath of governing or employer institutions, or of bringing unintended parties into collateral damage. We call to account disciplinary institutions (of ethnomusicology and music studies) which we hold dear (or not), and whose politico-economic structures we shelter under (for ethical, professional, paycheck and selfish reasons). And in so doing we humble ourselves as deeply-implicated scholar-

musicians operating with different kinds of advantage within hierarchical structures, with our different kinds of academic and class privilege.

And yet, as we tell our stories; we speak for the sake of being heard; we perform micro-activisms against micro-aggressions; we ‘call in’ as well as call out. We test and stake our ethical, disciplinary and personal boundaries. Necessarily individual, always situational and in constant states of recalibration, these changing demarcations of limits in the form of conditional go-to zones and no-go markers help us figure out where we choose to make our separate interventionist (as opposed to default) stands. To channel Danielle Brown again, in these acts of (re)evaluating and (re)narrating our particularised ways of being (and ways of *not*-being, or ways of *hopeful* being), we determine, individually, what decolonisation might mean to each of our different selves in our ethos, pedagogy, practice, and as a means of imagining desired futures.