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ARTIKEL

Thinking decolonially towards music's institution: A post-conference reflection

How do we talk about musical colonisation? How do we talk about this work of talking about it; that is, interrogating what we mean by colonisation and its counter-logic of decolonisation or decoloniality?

AF
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8. DECEMBER 2023

Introduction: Talking about the (de)colonial

How do we talk about musical colonisation? How do we talk about this work of talking about it; that is, interrogating what we mean by colonisation and its counter-logic of decolonisation or decoloniality? What can and must we talk about in this particular moment – when talk of decolonisation is at an all-time high, yet without clear consensus and much misuse of the concept? These questions, and the insights that emerged from them, animated the two-day conference *Music's institution and the (de)colonial*, convened by Sanne Krogh Groth, Phil Dodds, and Brandon Farnsworth, and hosted by the Division of Musicology at Lund University in early May 2023.¹

Early on in the conference, we unanimously acknowledged the necessity of decolonisation in music research and practice. We were also aware of the traps and gaps of our common discursive context, a context predominantly shaped by institutions. Some rightly pointed out how institutional talk of diversity, equity, and inclusion ultimately and problematically maintains the status quo. Others questioned the efficacy of decolonial research itself, given the systemic tendency of institutions in education, arts, and culture to reinforce the legacies of what Kofi Agawu calls musical colonisation.² On the first day, we contended with a set of challenging questions that set the tone for the rest of our time together: »why do we have these conferences on decolonisation if the people who are impacted are not part of these events and conversations? What power do institutions have, for instance, in repatriating stolen musics? Shouldn't the end goal of academic decolonisation be self-liberation?»

Choosing »the colonial« as the main conceptual theme in an international and institutionally supported music studies conference made us sensitive to two intellectual tasks.

Who does our work speak for, and who should our work speak to?

The first was to avoid the trap of appropriating decolonisation as a theoretical frame, a common move that (unintentionally or not) ends up detracting and extracting from the work of decolonial music scholars, activists, and practitioners whose efforts are focused on returning land and resources stolen by colonial perpetrators to rightful communities worldwide.³ We chose to concentrate our collective analysis on musical colonisation itself as a *process of processes*. This is important to counter a prevalent way of thinking about colonialism as a monolithic historical force, rather than something made up of historical, political, aesthetic, and material processes. Revising our inaccurate assumptions about colonialism this way may not directly feed into decolonisation work per se, but it can sharpen our ability to identify, expose, and eventually dismantle processes of musical colonisation.



Phil Dodds and Ucee-Uchenna L. Nwachukwu getting ready for Ucee's talk at the conference Music's institution and the (de)colonial, Lund University, Sweden, 4–5 May 2023. © Sanne Krogh Groth

Productive ignorance

The second task in framing the conference was to clarify our specific intentions for choosing a theme that addressed the »(de)colonial«. We thought there was great potential in comparatively exploring the phenomena of/against colonialism by gathering contexts and disciplines that wouldn't usually be analysed side by side. Our conference presentations covered music practices of and from Australia, East Asia, North America, Northern Europe, South America, South Africa, Southeast Asia, the UK, and Ukraine. The political and historical periods discussed ranged from the 16th and 17th centuries of European colonial rule, the 19th and 20th centuries of late modernity, and the emerging challenges of the 21st century. Musical genres varied from the Western Art Music canon to indigenous, Native, and marginalised sound cultures, and experimental sound and noise art. Organisational and institutional settings ran the gamut from the popular music industry, underground subcultures and experimental art festivals, grassroots initiatives, multi-stakeholder campaigns supported by national agencies and private funders, and primary schools and university-level programs for music education.

The nature of our projects also differed considerably: some presented more research-oriented and theory-driven analyses of aesthetics and historical musicology, while others leaned towards ethnographies of on-the-ground activism, mediation, teaching, and performance. Finally, there were significant differences in the geographies of our studies, with some focusing on multi-sited cross-border mobilities and others analysing place-based phenomena (e.g. a neighbourhood, a local underground movement).

The breadth of our projects made us sensitive both to the temptation to make everything fit theoretically (potentially replicating the very dynamics we sought to critique), and the impossibility of doing so. Nevertheless, the multiversal quality of musical (de)colonisation and of musicology itself became a source of inspiration to us in the course of listening to one another. For many of us, it was a clarifying and stimulating moment when Anjeline described her history of discomfort with using the term »decolonial«, and her ultimate embracing of decolonisation as an »emergent destination« – an uncertain, shifting place to which we can nevertheless direct our »finite modicum of agency« in colonial-institutional contexts.

»I found it extremely productive and important that the topic of decolonisation brought together scholars from all subfields of musicology,« says Maria. »This is something that we as academics should strive to do more often: how to focus on solving collective issues in a collaborative way and not dwell on the disciplinary borders and differences.«

Whilst the sheer diversity and complexity of research contexts frustrated any attempts at straightforward theorisation, we did get a clear sense of the vastness of what we don't know. We discovered this gap of knowledge in many ways, such as (for instance) finding unexpected similarities with studies from a different area/era, and consciously reckoning with the impact of our own biases and assumptions.

Working through these layers of difference became a mode of productive ignorance that generated vital and critical possibilities of learning through collaboration. There was a spirit of reflexive inquiry that threaded through the diversity of our presentations: Who does our work speak for, and who should our work speak to? Who does this work benefit? How does music, shaped by the insitutional(ising) dynamic of knowledge production and creative practice, serve decolonial aims of resistance, representation, memory, and healing? What approaches and concepts would be useful to not only thematise the disparate strands of our work, but also provide some kind of useful common ground of thinking from which to mutually strengthen our projects – without perpetuating the harmful tendencies of our institutional habitus?

Perspective, practice, positionality: Strategic approaches

What do we do next, going forward? Our conference presentations and subsequent conversations seemed to point to a common understanding of musical decoloniality as the work pursued within and against institutional processes to enact (whether directly or indirectly) the politics of resistance, representation, and repair in and through music/sound. Because the legacies of colonisation proliferate through multiple and simultaneous factors, and because our frames of addressing colonisation are manifold and specific, we found value in identifying strategic approaches that could resonate across different contexts of institutional challenge and opportunity. We might think of these along three conceptual axes of perspective, practice, and positionality. At the end of this piece, we compile a glossary of our presenters' respective strategies and approaches, in the hope of providing a resource for furthering decolonial research.

»We need to recognise, from the perspective of practice, that 'creativity' and 'novelty' are not universals«

1. Decentering perspectives

Against and beyond colonial universalism in music. A number of presentations revolved around the theme of de-centering and de-imposing the epistemological paradigm of Eurocentric and Anglo-American universalism which continues, in explicit and latent ways, to reinforce colonial hierarchies of musical experience, value, and knowledge. Mhoze Chikowero proposed the concepts of sonic re-engineering and cultural rearmament to describe, respectively, the long history of European musical colonisation, and more importantly, the African decolonisation which resisted this sonic re-engineering »every step of the way« since the 1890s. He argued that music formed an effective »cultural fortress« that »re-armed« Zimbabweans against the colonial technologies of radio media, education, and religion that sought to subjugate African culture throughout the century of Zimbabwean colonisation and self-liberation.

Through her interviews with participants in various Chinese rock, metal, punk, and hip hop communities, Yiren Zhao likewise drew attention to the ways that non-Western artists resist Western-dominated framings of their subculture, and highlighted the need to attune to multiple modernities in the analysis of global popular musics.

Likewise, Phil Dodds' research on the music standardisation practices of 19th century Moravian missionaries throughout African and Caribbean colonies demonstrated the critical approach of de-naturalising musical universalism, which »pays attention to what musical colonisation is made up of which combinations of processes – and to whom or what it is attributable – who has the power, who oversees, who administers – and over what scale.« His categorisation of the ways that music functioned through colonial technologies of scale-building can support contemporary projects of decolonial critique that identify mechanisms active in current institutional contexts of musical practice (see section 3 below).

Finally, through her reflections as an educator and curator moderating the issue of appropriation of indigenous sound culture by Norwegian musical composers, Hild Borchgrevink sounded an urgent call for intersectionality in music practice, noting how the absence of reflexivity in cultural institutions perpetuated colonial injustices through the apparatuses of educational and cultural gatekeeping. »We need to recognise, from the perspective of practice, that 'creativity' and 'novelty' are not universals,« she says. An intersectional approach that resists musical colonialism in creative practice must therefore take into account »the doings of the creator(s) and the performer(s), the doings of the sounding musical structures in themselves, and the doings in possible readings and receptions of them.«

Outside formal and official histories. Focusing on silence, and the politics of silencing, can complicate the actions and histories of musical colonisation in multiple ways. In her presentation on the use of hymnbooks as a tool of social control and conversion in Canadian missionary schools, Erin Johnson-Williams introduced the idea of sonic necropolitics: a way to listen to the »silent archives« of indigenous/Native resistance in contexts of colonial coercion. On the other end of the spectrum, Mykhailo Chedryk's paper on 1960s Kyiv avant-garde composers and artists, and Yurii Chekan's presentation on Ukrainian musical heritage counteracted the silencing effect coming from a common historical misperception of Ukrainian culture as not colonised. Through the lens of unconscious colonial resistance, Mykhailo characterised the avant-garde underground movement as an instance of implicit but determined self-expression in opposition to ideological constraints imposed by the Stalinist regime. Meanwhile, Yurii's detailed account of Baroque and Romantic schools of Ukrainian composition shows the contradictory tendencies inherent in the systemic integrity of music, particularly in musical practices that both resist and reproduce dominant ideology.

2. Thinking from practice

A number of us at the conference shared embodied and ethnographic insights as practitioners in diverse fields inside and outside institutions – as educators, curators, performers, and intermediaries occupying various roles in collaborative partnerships between public and private actors, across different scales of belonging and identity. This particular focus on praxis felt necessary, given that the institutional divide between theory and practice is still based on an exclusionary logic that relegates oppressed groups to subordinate positions as case studies and beneficiaries of diversity and inclusion initiatives. To avoid this trap, many of us proposed a praxis-oriented approach to foreground indigenous/Native voices, understand collaborative dynamics of decolonial practice, work ethically within/from institutions, and critique (de)colonial positionality.

Foregrounding indigenous and Native creativity. For obvious and necessary reasons, listening more closely to indigenous and native voices is critical in public spheres where they are still overwhelmingly silenced or tokenised. Doing so extends beyond the metrics of diversifying voices, and undermines colonial processes of »othering« minority groups, for instance through colonial sonic re-engineering.

Ellen Marie Bråthen Steen's survey of indigenous Sámi musical artists showed how their strategy of expressive resistance fuses cultural heritage with new technology and contemporary genres, often exceeding the categorical constraints of the Sámi label itself. Her work found resonances with Bernardo Illari's presentation on (post-)colonial South American composers from the 18th to 20th century who appropriated and »twisted« dominant idioms in European classical music to create »shocking effects, unforeseeable variety, or aesthetic tension.« He proposed the concept of reverse assimilation to reveal how the fundamental agency of colonised peoples to empower themselves through creative work can be heard in subtle, but no less powerful, ways. Meanwhile, writing about indigenous Javanese music, Aryo Danusiri and Halida Bunga Fisandra analysed the Yogyakarta Royal Orchestra's experiment of fusing the frequency differences of gamelan and Western orchestral instruments as an attempt at sonic mediation. In evaluating institutional efforts to revitalise indigenous music, they raised an important reminder to pay attention to the sonic and social politics of collaboration, which will always be »(im)possible« and open-ended.

Working with and from institutional dynamics. A second way that a praxis-focused approach opens up institutional frameworks of music practice and research is in building the capacity for non-Indigenous or non-native actors in positions of power to critique, imagine, and operationalise more reflexive and less extractive models of transcultural collaboration. Nils Bubandt and Sanne Krogh Groth tackled this challenge head-on by using the concepts of their

Indonesian musical collaborators to challenge Western musical theory. One example is the Indonesian slang term *alay*, which they translate into the musical term *transposition* to refer to the sonic and social mobilities of experimental music across Europe and Southeast Asia. Through their »aesthetic-anthropological approach« they centre their Indonesian collaborators' »curatorial authority« in co-producing the research, and provide the institutional and organisational means to conduct the project along more equitable and sustainable lines of collaboration. "The music of our Indonesian interlocutors already entails a break with Western musical theory and historiography. So, too, does their own critical reflection about their art" they say. »It is this double break that we hope to understand by learning from our Indonesian interlocutors. We allow our understanding to be reshaped by and through dialogue, to get a multidimensional and situated understanding of the music both when it is performed in Indonesia and in Europe.«

In a similar way, Caryl Mann's ethnographic work examines the transposition of Western classical music to non-traditional settings and musicians of African and Asian heritage in Brixton, South London. Her concept of spatial entanglement shows that these initiatives disrupt the colonial norms of Western classical music performance whilst also being entangled in processes of urban change. Such phenomena require a discussion of place in debates concerning equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies.

Tracking movements and works across borders and genres. Third, practice-based approaches should be applied to analysing contemporary initiatives to revive post- and decolonial musical traditions. One approach may be summarised as ecological and movement-oriented, foregrounding the multi-faceted and processual nature of musical decolonisation. This much was clear in Maria M. Rijo Lopes da Cunha's presentation, which detailed the contemporary *Tajdid min al-Dakhil* (»Renewal from Within«) movement in Lebanon and the Arab Levant, a decolonising movement unique in its wide range of musical interventions, from performance practice to institutional patronage and archival research. Her notion of transnational musical legacy elucidates the complications involved in the retrieval, revival, and contemporary reconfiguration of legacies that predate the nation-state. Such projects unfold in the possibilities of exchange and solidarity undertaken by a diverse range of musical actors across cultural-geographical borders and scholarly, pedagogical, and creative roles.

A second possible approach to understanding the practices of musical decolonisation is textual-linguistic, as seen in Søren Møller Sørensen's paper on *al-Burda*, a contemporary literary and musical reworking of a traditional Islamic-Arabic poetic technique by the Egyptian-Palestinian poet Tamir al-Barghuthi and Egyptian musician Mustafa Said. Recognising how music practitioners produce aesthetic works as junctures not only of different artistic mediums, but also currents of political activism and cultural revivalism, provides an effective window into the complex factors that constitute anti- and decolonial creative expression.

Experiential modes of decolonial knowledge. Finally, exploring how politics can be heard, and knowledge accessed, through embodied experience is in itself a decolonial turn that can foster new forms of knowing. Anja Mauruschat's presentation articulated the struggle for decolonisation among the Inuit in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) in terms of the contemporary revitalisation of *qilaat* (Inuit frame drum), a cultural practice suppressed for over 300 years. By presenting the rhythms, voices, and stories of her interlocutors in the form of an audio paper, she showed how sonic agency can serve as a means of decolonial intervention, one that also extends to scholarly representations of those efforts.

In a similar vein of employing sonic materiality as a methodological frame, Xenia Benivolski's paper followed the political history of traditional church bells in colonised regions in Eastern Europe and Soviet Central Asia, which were melted to cast weapons and monuments. The approach of sonic archeology—following the various iterations of sonic objects and materials through time – can resonate the contemporary moment in deeper, historical ways, and be »representative of a collective voice that I feel is lost to a violently colonising force, present from the fall of the Ottoman Empire, to the fall of Soviet communism, to the current Russian invasion of Ukraine.«

3. (Self-)questioning the decolonial position

If the institutional norms of music practice and research continue to be structured implicitly along colonial lines of thinking – even as the language of social justice movements permeates these spaces – then it is crucial to interrogate the context, function, and impact of explicit (de)colonial positions adopted in official discourse. It is also necessary to closely examine and reflect upon all levels of music education and its institutions, which play a fundamental role in establishing and maintaining such norms and strongly shapes the practitioners it produces.

Brandon Farnsworth showed us one such instance of this work in his ongoing institutional ethnography of *Borealis*, an annual festival for experimental music in Bergen, Norway. In examining how the festival's diversity and inclusion policies are inseparable from neoliberal cultural practices, Brandon reveals how festivals such as *Borealis* hold an »ambiguous position« between critiquing and affirming hegemonic power. Here, the strategy of comparing the map to the landscape can be a way to understand how official discourses of diversity in experimental music are themselves entangled in ongoing processes of in- and ex-clusion.

Sharing their in-depth fieldwork with a student string quartet in a North American university music department, Ucee-Uchenna L. Nwachukwu analysed a »strange« disconnect among the majority-white students and administration. On the one hand, they viewed decolonisation as a hypothetical "solution" to acknowledged problems of diversity in Western classical music; on the other hand, they ignored the need to engage in decoloniality as a lived and long-term process that entails (among other things) »unlearning the values and perspectives of white supremacy and critically interrogating our commitment to ideas of 'talent' and 'excellence', and the way we experience social bonds and responsibilities.« In the spirit of bell hooks and James Baldwin,⁴ Ucee-Uchenna powerfully demonstrated the cross-disciplinary strategy of directly examining unmarked adversities in the musical communities to which we belong, "not out of hatred but out of a desire to heal – and no one can heal before understanding what's truly wrong.«

Taking her cue from the theoretical interventions of Aboriginal academics such as Chelsea Watego⁵ and Margo Neale,⁶ Rosanna Lovell's paper addressed the question of how non-indigenous/Native educators can ethically teach First Nations culture without perpetuating settler colonial power dynamics. One way to do this is for educators to work towards a decolonial positionality: reflexively considering one's role of cultural transmission by taking care to contextualise curricular materials and pedagogical decisions in terms of the society and community in which one works. »It's about individuals willing to educate themselves and make changes in their own work, challenging their own biases and norms,« she says, "and not just speaking abstractly about concepts and having one or two token gestures of 'inclusion' or 'diversity'.«

For practitioners from formerly or currently colonised groups, positioning oneself within decolonisation discourse poses a different challenge. On the one hand, decoloniality is clear and necessary as a long-term goal-point for society; on the other, it is a complicated trajectory with no guarantee of success or resolution. Anjeline de Dios, writing from her experience as a Filipino sound artist participating in transcultural residences and festivals in Berlin and Yogyakarta, proposed that we think of decoloniality as an emergent destination in order to foreground the partial but potent modicum of agency we each have to act, even as we are entangled in colonising processes.

Colonialism rests on multiple forms of violence: physical, structural, symbolic, and institutional

Conclusion: Epistemological humility

Colonialism rests on multiple forms of violence: physical, structural, symbolic, and institutional. It also rests on an epistemic violence: the eradication of understandings of reality; the subsequent impoverishment of our collective experience of the human and the more-than-human; and the tragic diminishment of our capacity for futurity, imagination, wisdom, and hope. It continues to operate when we remain complicit in upholding a supremacist epistemology – a kind of »abysmal thinking« in which only one reality counts, while others fall into the abyss of the unreal, the evil, the inferior, and/or the invalid. What this conference has made clear for us is that decolonising, if nothing else, entails a refusal to perpetuate this epistemicide. There are many ways to do this, but perhaps the most immediate means at hand is to hold open the possibility of multiple experiential realities.

In other words, processes of decoloniality proceed from a basic epistemological humility. This humility consists of a constant awareness that one perspective, history, or experience of colonialism cannot stand in for others; a consequent willingness to reckon with both the unconscious limitations and potential contributions of our respective positions; and a capacious patience for tolerating the discomfort and ambiguity that come with any conversation spoken in many languages, through many logics.

»There are many forms of knowledge out there in the world and only some of them trickle into academia,« observes Rosanna. »A decolonial approach can be an invitation to give attention to these knowledges that are not yet 'heard'. It will also be challenging on a personal level and make for a lot of work, unlearning and critically understanding institutions, canons, history... for those of us passionate about music this is surely worthwhile and important, to learn and to listen, to 'hear' beyond the institutionalised Western perspective we already know.«

Although we acknowledge that this work is still inadequate – in full recognition that the very conditions that enable our conversation come from our privilege as institutional academics and creative practitioners – we know that we have at least identified for ourselves a better point of departure, a clearer sense of where to go next, and a stronger sense of resolve to »stay with the trouble«⁷ necessary for genuine decolonial resistance.



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RESEARCH STRATEGIES & PRACTICES FOR MUSIC'S INSTITUTION AND THE (DE)COLONIAL: A CONFERENCE GLOSSARY

Perspective

1. Sonic re-engineering: the institutional process of European musical colonisation through various economies and technologies of church, state, and the army.
2. Cultural rearmament: sustained anti-colonial resistance against sonic re-engineering through various economies and technologies of media, popular culture, and cultural politics.
3. Attuning to multiple modernities: analysing the notion and phenomena of modernity as parts of a process that is differentiated, not monocultural
4. De-naturalising musical universalism: identifying the varied scale-building processes that colonial attempts at universalising music have historically entailed
5. Intersectionality in practice: deconstructing implicit universalism in creative practice

6. Sonic necropolitics: a practice of research/memory that listens to archival silences of colonisation
7. Unconscious colonial resistance: artistic self-expression in indirect opposition to colonising and imperial powers
8. Systemic integrity: the merging of contradictory movements of colonial reproduction and resistance in creative practices by colonised subjects
9. Expressive resistance: the use of creative media, sonic, and cultural practices by indigenous artists to disrupt the categorical constraints imposed on their identity
10. Reverse assimilation: creative practices by colonised subjects that subvert colonial power through indirect, counter-intuitive means

Practice

1. Sonic mediation: experimental attempts to bridge contrasting or disparate sonic elements through tuning and other processes of musical transposition
2. Alay/Transposition: the process of mobilising sounds, resources, genres, and relationships to create a cross-border sonic exchange of practitioners and/as researchers
3. Spatial entanglement: music performance and practice as a spatial process of colonial inclusion or exclusion
4. Transnational legacy: the complex institutional dynamic of musical/cultural revivalism as a postcolonial regional formation
5. Works as junctures: a focus on postcolonial sonic/musical texts as encapsulations of complex aesthetic and political currents
6. Sonic agency: the capacity of sound to exercise and express human freedom and subjectivity
7. Sonic archeology: an iterative research approach that follows iterations of sound objects and materials over time

Position

1. Comparing map to landscape: a strategy for critiquing the entanglement of decolonial discourse with institutional practice
2. Examining unmarked adversities: a strategy for identifying discrepancies between decolonial discourse and action within music institutions
3. Decolonial positionality: the reflexive cycle of learning and teaching indigenous/First Nations culture from a non-indigenous position
4. Emergent destination: the notion that decoloniality functions as a clear ethical and political end-goal with an uncertain and open-ended trajectory.

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- 1 In this essay, the authorial »we« refers in a broad sense to the 20 conference presenters. In a narrower sense, »we« who write here are the 15 presenters who responded to a call for post-conference reflection, using a simple template of questions sent out a month after the conference. Anjeline de Dios synthesised the reflections as first author, creating a draft that the rest of the authors then collectively edited and finalised.
 - 2 Kofi Agawu (2016). »Tonality as a colonizing force in Africa,« in R. Radano and T. Olaniyan, eds. *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, 334-355. Duke University Press.
 - 3 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012). »Decolonization is not a metaphor,« *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1): 1-40
 - 4 James Baldwin and Raoul Peck (2017). *I Am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition to the Documentary Film Directed by Raoul Peck* (2016). Vintage; and bell hooks (1991). »Theory as Liberatory Practice,« *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 4(1): 1-12.
 - 5 Chelsea Watego (2021). *Another Day in the Colony*. University of Queensland Press.
 - 6 Margo Neale and Lynne Kelly (2020). *SONGLINES: The Power and Promise*. Thames & Hudson., and the practical experiences of music teachers in Australia,
 - 7 Donna Haraway (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*. Duke University Press.

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