

Review: Popular Music and the Postcolonial

Edited by Oliver Lovesey

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For more than two decades now, the subject of the volume at hand has intrigued me. There are three main reasons for this: a disciplinary one, a societal one and a conceptual one. From a disciplinary stance, the relative scarcity of theoretical reliance to so-called postcolonial studies within both popular music studies and ethnomusicology continues to perplex me. This in fact applies in my estimation to music studies in more general, and I am tempted to take it as an indication of disciplinary postcolonial guilt. As the demands to decolonize curricula become more vocal, I cannot but wonder whether they actually result in any significant structural changes, apart from maybe abandoning the “ethno” prefix – which in turn may only lead to further consolidation of the neoliberal conservatism already evident in the instrumentalizing strategies of higher education worldwide. “Music” is art and “ology” is science, so never mind the cultural scholar.

At issue is also the preoccupation of postcolonial studies with belles-lettres. This is noted by Oliver Lovesey in the short introduction to *Popular Music and the Postcolonial*, yet the question remains *how exactly* does the investigation into popular music contribute to understanding “the historical and ongoing process of decolonization”, or to challenging “the spatiotemporal boundaries of the postcolonial” (p. 1), any more than any other instance of what may be taken as a form of popular culture. Here, I am tempted to invert the challenge and ask how the postcolonial may be of aid in understanding and rethinking the spatiotemporal boundaries of popular music. This relates directly to the contradictory emphases on centuries-long colonial legacies on the one hand, and on the presentist “explosion of popular music in the 1950s and ’60s” (p. 1) on the other. Disappointingly, I once again detect a fair deal of Anglocentrism in all this, augmented further by the

unsubstantiated methodological need to distantiate postcolonial popular music studies from ethnomusicology. The latter may sometimes involve “salvage or archival ethnography” or an interest in “the cultural globalization of world music”, yet I fail to grasp the reasons to downgrade it, especially whilst welcoming an “expansion of analyses to embrace cultural studies, performance studies, and world history as well as the inter- and multidisciplinary” (p. 1).

In the chapters in this collection, disciplinary debates surface only incidentally, to the extent that one may take Lovesey’s outline of “postcolonial popular music studies” (p. 1) as merely one extrapolation amongst many. Admittedly, references to performance abound across the volume, yet supported by variegated theorization and therefore inducing the question whether (Anglophone) popular music scholars really are either so ignorant of or so antagonistic towards (Anglophone) ethnomusicology that the centrality of performances in it remain unacknowledged. Relatedly, one is quickly reminded of the gender-related theories of performativity, and by extension of the intersections between racialization, social class, gender, and sexuality that are often addressed within postcolonial studies. Those interested in these intersections will need a lot of patience and interpretive skills when reading the volume, and they might be outright surprised to discover that feminist theorization is not mentioned once. Regarding the key postcolonial theoreticians, this results in an all-male panel, as it were: Agamben, Bhabha, Fanon, Gilroy and Said are all there, but no Ahmed, hooks or Spivak for instance.

This critique notwithstanding, the chapters deal with pivotal relevant socio-cultural dynamics at stake, evinced by the organization of them in two groups, the first of which foregrounds developments in Africa and the second in Europe. After the introductory remarks by Lovesey, the volume opens with David Pier’s analysis of “Muteesa, Baalaba Taliwo Buganda”, a Ugandan *kadongo kamu* song that recounts the latest royal exile of the Buganda *kabaka* (king) during the post-independence turmoil in the late 1960s. The song was written in the early 1970s and it resurfaced some four decades later on YouTube, which provides Pier with a propitious chance to foreground the role of music in a mixture of historical collective traumas, technological change, and the current corrupt forces of deregulative global capitalism. In the treatment, not only are certain regional historical complexities of the colonial reign and its aftermath outlined, but they are also discussed in relation to a variety of contemporary grassroots “side-politics” and how “[p]opular music, with its cyclical rhythmic aesthetic and mass-media archival dimension, helps to promote [an] ethnic imaginary of tragic recurrence” (p. 7). While Pier accounts for the developments of the *kadongo kamu* genre and frames it as a type of popular music by pointing to the centrality of urban and mediated contexts, one may again ask whether there is anything in the treatment that makes the disciplinary distinction between popular music studies and ethnomusicology meaningful. There is even an example of notated music included!

The centrality of songs for remembering the colonial atrocities and the ones who were made to disappear is emphasized also by Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ in his reading of “the songs of resistance” in the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s experimental stage play *Maitũ Njugĩra*, with an aim “to uncover a politics of resistance present within popular song that unmasks the sly civility and ambivalence of colonial discourse, particularly its rhetoric of uplift” (p. 22). At issue here is not merely a

staged collection of Kenyan resistance songs from the 1920s to the 1960s, but the transformation of a musical play “from a vehicle for high-cultural entertainment to an instrument of political mobilization” (p. 23). In the process, the songs “were borrowed from ‘tradition,’ underwent improvisation, and were then recycled by the counterpublics [and] disseminated through non-commercial media” (p. 32). The theoretical acuity of the literary analysis and its interdisciplinary contribution notwithstanding, those interested in the “popular” of postcolonial popular music studies may grow increasingly impatient and baffled. An additional indication of the all but mandatory interdisciplinary forces at play may be that there are no subheadings in Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ’s essay, and whether this constitutes a form of postcolonial critique or creative writing is for others to debate. I find this lack uninviting and mind-numbing.

Some relief to the definitional and labelling conundrums is provided by Anja Brummer who in her treatment of the centrality of “popular music” in the postcolonial nation-building in Cameroon notes that the concept “does not exist in Africa” (p. 46, note 1). Given the generalizing if not pan-Africanist tone and the fact that she herself uses the concept as an analytical category, it might be more prudent to emphasize the associated risks of misunderstanding, or how the Eurocentric axiomatic conceptualizations become challenged and transmogrified in the variety of local postcolonial dynamics in Africa.

My favourite piece in the volume is the “bridge” between Africa and Europe. Here, Wouter Capitain astutely discusses the implications of Edward Said’s ignorance of or even disdain for (conventional) popular music. Indeed, the elitist, orientalist and universalist tendencies involved prove to be fruitfully contradictory and counter-intuitive as “they potentially silence considerations of alternatives to hegemonic cultural expressions” (p. 50). Thus, popular music, even – or precisely – in its “general” Anglocentric variant, emerges as a pivotal site to further postcolonial theorization, not just by taking seriously cultural forms that many people clearly take seriously but also by interrogating internal incongruities in the ideas of the influential intellectuals.

The latter half of the collection concentrates on the global postcolonial condition as it manifests itself in certain European locations and national contexts, namely Occitan France, Northern Ireland, and metropolitan London. The general themes discussed here include so-called internal colonialism (*colonialisme intérieur*, p. 63) and the uneasy relation between the imperial past and the postcolonial present. This is in fact intimately linked to the societal impetus of my interest in the overall topic, as in recent years there has emerged an increasing amount of discussion of how the postcolonial condition manifests itself in the Nordic region. There is often a similar juxtaposition in operation here, as on the one hand the participation of the Nordic countries in the colonial endeavours is examined, and on the other hand what is being scrutinized are the traces of those escapades in the contemporary phase of global migration, neo-nationalism, and racism. To this end, it would be fairly straightforward to consider the similarities between the Nordic region and Virginie Magnat’s remarks about the impact of colonial ideologies on the 1970s folk revivals in southern France – even if, again, the boundaries of popular music become stretched. Likewise, more broadly applicable are Stephen R. Millar’s analytical comments about “the complex (post)colonial schizophrenia” (p. 84) that

becomes evident in certain examples of Irish republican music, as well as Justin A. Williams's perceptive observations concerning the neocolonial critique and historical counter-narratives in the UK hip hop scene. Turning the northbound trajectory towards east, the collection closes with Seung-Ah Lee's scrutiny of Korean *trot* as indicative of "a marked bipolarity towards Japanese culture" (p. 108), foregrounding both regional forms of colonization and global dynamics in the guise of Americanization in particular. Indeed, by travelling east far enough one enters the West.

And so, the circle is complete, and the readers become a little wiser about popular music and the postcolonial. Some of them might get a strange feeling of *déjà vu*, though, as the volume is in fact the rerelease of an issue of *Popular Music and Society* from 2017 (vol. 40:1). To some extent, this may also explain the disciplinary conundrums; at issue is not a comprehensive collection of essays foregrounding key theoretical debates, but a series of loosely linked independent articles, originally published under the constraints of a relatively tight schedule. Thus, the title of the volume does appear to be a bit grandiose.

My enthusiasm towards the volume diminished substantially once I realized it is a re-release. While this may be taken as an indication of the relevance of the ideas expressed in the issue, the verbatim reproduction of it signals more dubious dynamics that pertain to academic publishing and meritocracy. One might even suspect that "postcolonial" functions here as an advert of sorts, as another buzzword capitalized on by the ever-innovative corporate publisher. I would have expected the publisher to at least doublecheck the text for typos; not many popped out but one example is Justin A. Williams quoting Nabeel Zuberi, with an extra "i" in the surname.

Another personal repellent is that I was provided with the electronic edition only. Certainly, there are benefits with the digital interface especially when it comes to searching names and phrases (rendering the index redundant); yet I ran into unexpected problems of access due to different licenses, and I am still uncertain about the page numbers as the text runs unbrokenly on the screen. There are situations where the interface of the printed page is superior, and I had planned to read much of the volume outside during the summer of my hemisphere. Maybe it is appropriate that privileged professors do their readings online in their dusky chambers, thus shifting their inadvertent support from forestry to the ICT industry. Whether that has anything to do with either popular music or the postcolonial, is a matter for future debates in journals and edited volumes alike.