

Review

Christine Bacareza Balance. 2016. *Tropical Renditions: Making Music Scenes in Filipino America*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. ISBN 978-0-82236-001-8 (pbk). 230 pp.

Reviewed by: Jared Mackley-Crump, Auckland University of Technology
jmackley@aut.ac.nz

Keywords: diaspora; ethnomusicology; Filipino-America; Philippines; popular music; scene theory

Christine Bacareza Balance's fascinating exploration of Filipino-American musical spaces opens (and closes) with analyses of music on film. It establishes, from the outset, the goal of incorporating not only the sonic, but also the visual and the bodily into its analytical framework. The re-telling of an early ethnographic encounter, captured in the documentary *Bontoc Eulogy*, purposefully works against colonial representations of the other and, from this, comes the book's primary theoretical perspective: disobedient listening, an act that 'refuses to play the roles of an authentic other, native informant, or indebted giver' (5).

Balance advocates this approach as a way to counter long-entrenched, dominant narratives; to reclaim agency and re-map the relationship between Filipinos and US popular music and, in turn, Filipino music. As an entry point, she provides a 'disobedient' reading of colonial-era photos. Where the archives record a moment as one where New World musical technology is brought to the wowed natives, Balance instead asserts ambivalence on the part of indigenous communities, with eyes turned away in boredom in some cases (25). As a means to contextualize the enduring, dominant narratives she listens against, Balance also explores the long history of US–Philippine relations, and its enduring political, economic and cultural aftermath.

With history and context in check, *Tropical Renditions* does not then set out to offer a broad canvassing of Filipino-American music-making. Instead it provides depth, through four investigations of different Filipino-American music 'scenes', scenes that traverse varying geographical, temporal, sociopolitical and musical spaces. West Coast hip-hop, karaoke, performance art and Pinoy rock may appear divergent analytical foci, especially given Balance's intention to not seek out essentialized elements of Filipino-ness. Indeed, she is not trying to answer the question,

'what is Filipino about Filipino popular music?', and critiques studies that continue to characterize Filipino music through a classical/colonial/European vs. Indigenous binary. At each turn, Balance confronts imperialist renderings that have positioned Filipinos and Filipino musical activities as 'primitive, child, mimic and machine' (5) and offers in their place snapshots of these varied scenes as a means to position them as valuable creative sites of Filipino-American musical life.

This refusal to read narratives dominated by imperial violence is most forcibly evident in the first two case studies, while the latter two rely more on geographical juxtaposition to blur crass distinctions between Filipino music in America and American music in the Philippines. Again, a simplistic binary is resisted, but not succeeded and replaced. And this is, perhaps, a shortcoming of the work: while imploring its reader to disobediently listen against dominant narratives, to consider alternatives, it does not substantially offer an alternative theorization beyond the binary. This may, however, be Balance's intention. Rather than considering the degree to which artists make Filipino music, we are instead asked to consider visibly Filipino people making music, an approach that fits with latter definitions of ethnomusicology as the study of 'people making music' (e.g. Titon 2015). This shifts our analytical attention away from the musical text and towards performer physicality, although even within this lies the risk of collapse into binary, based on who does and does not 'look' Filipino. A theoretical catch-22.

Somewhat disappointingly, given its prominence as part of the book's title, engagement with scene theory seems less central to the text and its theoretical grounding; it is not discussed at length until the final Pinoy rock chapter. In saying this, readers interested in scene theory's focus on the varied and many spaces in which music is made are well served by some nicely descriptive accounts, such as the role of domestic spaces within the hidden history of Filipino hip-hop in America (37–39), or the 'transnational hubs' created by house parties, where karaoke transcends a simple mimicry label (72–76). Similarly, the mapping of noted performance artist Jessica Hagedorn's decades-long career richly brings to life the musical journey of a new immigrant coming-of-age in late-1960s San Francisco, with Hagedorn emerging as a performer influenced by postcolonial politics and artists in the early 1970s, and through to Downtown New York's 1980s art scenes. Along the way, we learn that Hagedorn 'does not (and cannot) easily abandon her memories for the promise of assimilation into her new home, especially when the soundtracks of these two places are parallel' (122). Likewise, the aforementioned Pinoy rock chapter traces significant developments in both San Francisco and Manilla, where Filipino rock musicians in both locations 'flipped the beat on Western pop musical objects and media' (154), and developed parallel scenes of transnationally-routed musical activity that defy easy categorization.

In summary, *Tropical Renditions* makes a worthwhile contribution to the ongoing negotiations over what can be considered constitutive of cultural, ethnic and/or national labels. In challenging us to listen disobediently, to move beyond stereotypes and binaries, Balance is hopeful we can find new ways of conceptualizing the musics representative of and in a fluid Filipino America.

Reference

Titon, Jeff Todd. 2015. 'Ethnomusicology as the Study of People Making Music'. *Musical Annual* 51/2: 175–85. <https://doi.org/10.4312/mz.51.2.175-185>