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Nonwestern Music and Decolonial Pedagogy in the Music Theory Classroom

BY MOLLY REID

Many scholars have called for North American music theory curricula to include music beyond the western classical canon. First, I show the benefit of situating such discussions within the “decolonial option” (Mignolo 2011). Then, I offer decolonial pedagogical techniques for integrating nonwestern music into the theory classroom. Drawing on Mohanty (2003) and Hess (2015), I explore three curricular models in which “Other” subject material is engaged. I then adapt the models to the music theory classroom, showing three vignettes centering around music for the Chinese *guzheng*. Decolonial pedagogy aligns most with the Comparative Musics Model in which all musics are understood relationally. The other two models are more tokenistic, yet easier to implement. I conclude by offering decolonial pedagogical strategies derived from the Comparative Musics Model and from recent anti-oppression music scholarship (Attas 2019, Chavannes and Ryan 2018/2022, Hisama 2018, Kim 2021, Lumsden 2018, Reed 2021) that can guide ethical and nonviolent musical engagement in music theory classrooms.



I am currently a graduate student and graduate assistant at Florida State University (FSU), a public “Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity” or R1 according to the Carnegie Commission Classification, which is located on the colonized ancestral, traditional, and contemporary land of Indigenous people including the Seminole, Miccosukee, Apalachee, and Muscogee. I presented paper versions of this article in 2022 at the Music Theory Southeast conference at FSU and the Pedagogy into Practice conference at Michigan State University, which is located on the colonized ancestral, traditional, and contemporary land of Indigenous people including the Anishinaabeg-Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwa, Odawa, and Potawatomi. Before beginning my studies at FSU in 2021, I was a graduate student and worked as a graduate assistant at Appalachian State University, the CUNY Graduate Center, and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, and I held a one-year adjunct teaching position at Appalachian State University.

I am also a white, settler, cisgender woman. I am still working to uncover and counteract my role in upholding colonial, white supremacist, and other harmful power structures in the spaces in which I live and work. As I am relatively new to scholarship regarding settler-colonialism and decolonization, and given that I have operated almost exclusively within spaces steeped in western classical music culture for most of my

life in music, I have revised this paper several times as a result of ongoing reflection, discomfort, and (re)education. Ultimately, this paper does nothing to return any land to Indigenous people. Land repatriation is only a passing mention, rather than an integral aim of my argument. In this way, it is inherently flawed. This paper is a starting point of engagement with the impactful work already being done towards the goals of decolonization and towards disentangling music theory from violent power structures. Music theory instructors—especially those with dominant group privilege, who also hold more institutional power—have significant potential to dismantle systems of oppression. I invite the reader to view the article in this light.

Introduction

What should we teach in a music theory classroom? Whose music, whose theories, to whom, and for whom? These questions hold central importance in current curricular reform discussions. Many reform-minded pedagogues are scrutinizing a pedagogical canon entrenched by years of music theory pedagogy and research. From the number of semesters in the undergraduate curriculum devoted to part-writing to the musical examples or activities chosen to introduce rhythm, how do our pedagogical practices reinforce a core repertory of music and an unequal system that excludes based on identity? Efforts to improve existing curricula by including compositions beyond those created by members of the dominant white-European-cisgender-male group increase diversity, but also reinforce a “white racial frame” when the underlying analytical approach remains the same as that developed to analyze and teach western European art music.¹ If efforts to make music theory and pedagogy more inclusive reinforce the white racial frame, other approaches must be considered.²

This spurs a deeper look at some of the foundational assumptions of the field. Some collegiate music programs across the United States are moving towards the incorporation of nonwestern music and theories in their music theory curricula. These can be roughly divided into two approaches. One approach makes room within the existing undergraduate curriculum for nonwestern music. This might take the shape of a unit or a semester devoted to nonwestern music somewhere within the

¹ See Philip A. Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (September 2020): 2.1–3.9.

² With the acknowledgment that this is not a magic fix, Ewell posits that “music theories of nonwestern cultures—from Asia, South America, or Africa, for instance—can and should be part of basic required music-theory curricula, from freshmen music theory classes to doctoral history of theory seminars.” *Ibid.*, 3.5.

undergraduate sequence.³ Another approach is to redesign the curriculum from the bottom up. Advocates of this approach argue that this is the only way to counter the bias of western constructions of knowledge that naturalize or prioritize western art music.⁴

The main goal of this article is to illuminate the potential for deep and lasting change that may occur by integrating decolonial thinking and curricular reform—specifically, those reform approaches that involve incorporating nonwestern music into North American music theory curricula. I focus on undergraduate music theory curricula for the sake of simplicity, but acknowledge that pre-college and graduate curricula comprise equally important parts of the powerfully lurking North American Music Academy. I use the term “nonwestern music” to refer to music from places and cultures outside of the western European art music tradition.⁵ This problematic dichotomy is a product of the colonial mentality to be discussed below; using it, even critically, creates and upholds a binary opposition between the conceptual entities of the “west” and the “rest.”⁶

3 See Jane Clendinning, “Teaching World Music in the Music Theory Core,” in *The Norton Guide to Teaching Music Theory*, ed. Rachel Lumsden and Jeffrey Swinkin (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018): 267–284. Clendinning notes that, practically speaking, “over time the world music materials could be integrated more fully, as teachers become familiar with them, and as textbooks and other curricular materials are developed with this approach” (270).

4 See Cora S. Palfy and Eric Gilson, “The Hidden Curriculum in the Music Theory Classroom,” *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 32 (2018): 79–110. Within western music theory’s pedagogical canon, there is an implicit message is that “one necessarily needs to fit a set of very specific demographics (a majority are white, cisgender male, of Western-European, often German or Austrian descent, Christian, and heterosexual)” (84) in order for one’s music to be worthy of study in the theory classroom.

5 In this article, I use “western” to refer to music, music theories, and systems of music notation that can be traced to the practices of musicians from western European countries and to North American music, music theories, and systems of music notation that are derived from or based upon western European practices. I use “nonwestern” to denote music, music theories, and systems of music notation outside those practices. These terms are inherently problematic and harmful. They are not only unnervingly broad (especially “nonwestern”), but they are implicitly racially coded (“western” implies “white,” and therefore “nonwestern” implies “nonwhite”) and exist in an inherent hierarchical relationship as part of a binary opposition. I do not capitalize “nonwestern” or “western” in order to avoid showing priority of the latter over the former. As I discuss later in the article, this western/nonwestern dichotomy (along with its common, but nonequivalent, manifestation “western/world”) is itself a byproduct of the colonial mentality. As Robin Attas states: “Understanding and acknowledging the ways in which a discipline is colonial and Eurocentric is a complicated endeavour. However, there is a danger of spending so much time on this first task that decolonizing action and change never happen.” Robin Attas, “Strategies for Settler Decolonization: Decolonial Pedagogies in a Popular Music Analysis Course,” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 49, no. 1 (2019): 128.

6 Some scholars use “world” instead of “nonwestern” to participate in the same unequal power

First, I explore relevant literature related to decoloniality with an emphasis on the philosophical and pedagogical benefits that can be afforded to music theory through decolonial thinking. I then turn to Juliet Hess's (2015) three models for incorporating nonwestern music into elementary music education, based on Chandra M. Mohanty's (2003) models operating in western-focused women's studies curricula. I then adapt the models in three pedagogical vignettes in the undergraduate music theory classroom centering around music for the Chinese *guzheng*. Finally, I reflect on my process of creating the vignettes and discuss decolonial and other anti-oppression pedagogical techniques that may be adopted in music theory classrooms writ large.

The Decolonial Option

The relevance of decolonial thinking to current curricular reform issues is most apparent when considering what literary theorist Walter Dignolo calls the colonial mentality. This mentality originally emerged in tandem with western modernity during the Renaissance and still acts as the glue that binds together a celebratory historical narrative of western civilizations and their achievements. At the same time, the west's destructive actions and ideologies are frequently obscured, ignored, or denied.⁷

Dignolo argues that the colonial mentality is a byproduct of the colonial matrix of power, a concept invoked by sociologist Anibal Quijano to describe a world order which consolidates its power through control of four domains: the economy, authority (broadly construed), gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity. A white supremacist and patriarchal foundation of knowledge underlies these four domains. Woven into the fabric of this power structure is an aesthetic hierarchy that decides what is beautiful and worthy of attention—what is art and what is not.⁸ Combined

dynamic with “western.” In fact, the title of this paper was originally “World Musics and Decolonial Pedagogy in the Music Theory Classroom,” then was changed to “World Music...” before I finally shifted to “Nonwestern Music. . .” Although all of the terms at hand are problematic, I decided to use “nonwestern” and “western” because it makes clear the unequal power relationship that exists between the terms without the addition of other concepts. “World” suggests a counterpart—“non-world.” As a synonym for “western,” this is deeply troubling. It serves as a reminder of a narrative where the musical achievements of a handful of white, male, cisgender, western European composers are not only prized, but considered transcendent—above their own cultural circumstances, above the rest of humanity, and above the natural world. This encodes a message of white racial and patriarchal superiority. Author practices regarding capitalization and terminology of these terms and concepts vary. I have retained the conventions of the cited authors where applicable.

7 Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 19.

8 *Ibid.*, xv.

with a higher-education system that privileges western knowledge over nonwestern knowledge, we find the landscape in which North American music theory and its pedagogical canon reside.

Decolonial thinking requires a willingness to critically analyze power dynamics within institutions and systems. It encourages holistic consideration of how music theory and music theorists uphold philosophical assumptions that may be decades or even centuries old and how these assumptions perpetuate cultural values from the context in which they originated. When we cultivate greater awareness of the institutional systems in which we work and teach, we begin to realize how the most foundational bases of knowledge that define a field of study are not as stable and objective as they may appear. This realization carries the great power to disturb, disrupt, and shift.

Questioning objectivity, embracing pluralism, attending to local context, and rejecting unequal power structures are several core facets of decolonial pedagogy. Many theory pedagogues already utilize decolonial techniques in their classroom. Every time a teacher leaves room for multiple student interpretations of the same musical excerpt, they make the classroom a more equitable place by embracing pluralism and relinquishing some of their control as the instructor. Field-shifting changes arise when these techniques are combined with the introspective, decolonial thinking—when we are willing to look critically at how we know what we think we know and how we fit into the colonial matrix of power.

While the sort of epistemic decoloniality discussed above can lead to change, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang assert that decolonization in settler colonial nation-states such as the United States “must involve the repatriation of land. . . that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically.” They go on to state,

[W]hen we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym.⁹

Tuck and Yang argue that decolonization is not synonymous with antiracism or efforts to improve our curricula. This is critical because it causes us to reckon with music theory's physical and geographical landscape, in addition to the figurative one described above. Like a hypothetical instructor assigning students Price's sonata to analyze with the same tools used to analyze Brahms (and changing nothing else about their curriculum), land acknowledgments draw attention to destruction brought on

9 Ibid., 3.

by violent power structures but carry the danger of reinforcing those very structures when actions stop there.

While bringing in Price's sonata does increase the diversity of composers represented in the classroom, simply working to diversify the repertoire and absolving oneself of further responsibility to dismantle power structures can be seen as what Tuck and Yang call "moves to innocence."¹⁰ These virtue-signaling actions are often met with professional accolades or praise for being inclusive, but end up working against the goals of decolonization by upholding the systems that created inequality in the first place. Can the inclusion of nonwestern music in the music theory curriculum fit within the framework of decoloniality, or is this precisely what Tuck and Yang argue against? It is essential for those considering incorporating nonwestern repertoires in the music theory classroom to consider reasons for doing so. It is easy for such attempts to end up reinscribing western music and systems as dominant.

The Three Models

Juliet Hess has explicated three models for engaging nonwestern music in the general music classroom, drawing on work by Chandra M. Mohanty that describes the "manner in which 'Other' subject material" is engaged within western-focused women's studies curricula.¹¹ Here, I briefly summarize Hess's three models before turning to specific examples of how they could be adapted in the music theory classroom.

The "Musician-as-Tourist" model is the most overtly tokenistic of the three. In the general music classroom, it might look like a short unit on African drumming that is devoid of any specific cultural context or any discussion of Africa, its countries, or power relations. This is an example of "musical tourism" that creates an Other through the lack of cultural specificity as well as through the contrast it provides the main Eurocentric curriculum.

The "Musician-as-Explorer" model delves slightly deeper into the cultural or social contexts of the music it engages. In the class on African drumming, the Musician-as-Explorer would discuss the specific country or region of origin of the musical tradition, and how it functions in context. Still, students move from place to place studying music

¹⁰ Ibid., 9. Drawing on Janet Mawhinney's 1998 Master's thesis, Tuck and Yang describe "settler moves to innocence" formulated to deal with settlers' reality of "[d]irectly and indirectly benefitting from the erasure and assimilation of Indigenous peoples."

¹¹ Juliet Hess, "Decolonizing music education: Moving beyond tokenism," *International Journal of Music Education* 33, no. 3 (2015): 1.

of “exotic elsewhere” and do not get the opportunity to draw connections between genres and traditions.¹² The musician explores cultures and music outside of the main Eurocentric curriculum. For those who wish to include nonwestern music within the western-focused curriculum they already have, this model will most likely be the result.

Finally, the “Comparative Musics Model” is based on Mohanty’s assertion that the local and global are not defined in terms of physical geography or territory, but exist simultaneously and constitute each other. This model focuses on connections and relationships between “local” and “global”—as well as how they are inherently entwined with one another—and examines how these links may be conceptual, material, temporal, contextual, and so on.¹³

This means emphasizing the connections between music and its contexts, as well as the connections *between* musical contexts. In the general music classroom, Hess imagines that this model will allow for exploration of how the categories of race, class, gender, disability, and nation intersect with each other and with the music.¹⁴ Comparative teaching allows students to grasp how various musical traditions inform one another. It emphasizes interconnectedness and calls into question the usefulness of erecting strict categories and boundaries.

On the level of curricular reform in music theory, this may look like moving away from a curriculum based on a teleological narrative of western European art music and moving instead into a curriculum that centralizes various parameters of music—rhythm, timbre, melody, or harmony, for example.¹⁵ Here, musical knowledges are in dialogue with and inform each other, instead of existing as separate entities marked by geographic boundaries.

The Comparative Musics Model can certainly help guide theory curriculum overhauls. Could it also be helpful on a smaller scale, in situations where instructors may not have the option to redesign the entire curriculum? And what are some specific ways that these three models might operate in the context of the music theory classroom? In what follows, I use classroom vignettes based around the three

12 Ibid., 5–6.

13 Chandra M. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (London: Duke University Press, 2003): 242.

14 Hess, “Decolonizing music education,” 6.

15 For more on the “institutionalization of a teleological narrative assuming European musical superiority,” see Margaret E. Walker, “Towards a Decolonized Music History Curriculum,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–19. Walker writes that “[teaching] a history of music dating from late nineteenth century Europe without examining its origins is indeed to deliver a covert message of white superiority” (13).

pedagogical models to explore these questions. These examples center around music for the Chinese *guzheng*, to which I had been briefly introduced in a graduate seminar on analytic approaches to nonwestern music.¹⁶ The vignettes show the range of tokenism and unexamined colonial attitudes that can exist in different pedagogical approaches to music beyond the western classical canon. Finally, I reflect on the process of creating them, my levels of satisfaction and discomfort with the results, and questions for continued reflection.

First Vignette: “Musician-as-Tourist”

This vignette serves as the sole instructional day that students receive to become acquainted with the music of China. One of the hallmarks of the Musician-as-Tourist model is appropriative overgeneralization. First, students are introduced to traditional Chinese instruments through diagrams and instructional YouTube videos. Then, they listen to and compare three performances of “Fisherman’s Song at Dusk,” “Lao Liuban,” and “Dance of the Golden Snake” after being prompted to think about the musical parameters they have studied in class thus far.¹⁷ The main analytic activity is transcribing the piece “Fishermen’s Song at Dusk” in five-line staff notation.

From a decolonial perspective, there is much room for improvement here. The lack of cultural context and musical detail, and the minuscule weight the activity receives in the curriculum, contribute to tokenism. Why were these performances picked? What exactly is the purpose of listening to this music, other than to experience the “Other”? The three performances comprise three very different musical contexts, but the historical and social contexts of the pieces are not discussed.¹⁸ Although western notation is used in China, the music in this brief class is consumed using

¹⁶ The course was Jane Clendinning’s fall 2021 seminar for music theory doctoral students at Florida State University. I am grateful for the learning opportunities this course provided.

¹⁷ For a performance of “Fisherman’s Song at Dusk,” see Qian Jun, “Traditional Chinese Music: ‘Fisherman’s Song at Dusk,’ Chinese Zither Performance, April 1, 2013, YouTube video, 4:08. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfgqHwBdsXw&t=1s>.

For a performance of “Lao Liuban,” see Chinese Performing Arts of North America 北美中乐团(纽约), “江南丝竹《老六板》北美中乐团演奏 ‘Lao Liu Ban’ Chinese Performing Arts of North America Performance,” July 19, 2020, YouTube video, 0:00-7:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hCTUeqOWIA>.

For a performance of “Dance of the Golden Snake,” see China Symphony Orchestra 中国交响乐团, “Dance of the Golden Snake 金蛇狂舞,” September 21, 2009, YouTube video, 5:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKiBCKUxAMw>.

¹⁸ “Fishermen’s Song at Dusk” is a composed piece for the *guzheng* dating back to the Tang dynasty, “Lao Liuban” is a *qupai* (named tune) associated with *sizhu* (silk-bamboo) ensembles in Central-eastern to south China, and “Dance of the Golden Snake” is an example of modernized traditional music (*guoyue*) arranged for orchestra.

only the language and tools of western European art music. This reinforces it as the dominant repertoire and marks the quick and incomplete tour of “Chinese music” as an excursion to the periphery. The epistemic frame of western music theory lingers unacknowledged in the shadows.

Second Vignette: “Musician-as-Explorer”

The Musician-as-Explorer model solves some of the problems with the previous model while retaining others. This vignette is centered more specifically around the *guzheng*. This single class period begins with viewings of two short videos by world-class *guzheng* players Wu Fei and Haiqiong Deng. The first clip provides an orientation to the instrument’s layout, its 2500–3000-year history, and tuning. The second provides a brief overview of the six different schools of Chinese traditional music and demonstrations of the basic techniques for each hand, including the left-hand pitch-bending practice, *huayin*. The rest of class is devoted to a quick overview of *jianpu* cipher notation, guided by another informal video by Wu Fei that provides students with the answers to the next set of guided questions. Students conclude class by watching the performance recording of “Fishermen’s Song at Dusk” with the score.

From the perspective of decolonial pedagogy, this lesson is perhaps slightly preferable to the Musician-as-Tourist model. The use of videos from expert, culture-bearing musicians decenters the instructor as the locus of knowledge. The class discussion includes the *guzheng*’s historical and present-day contexts, specific techniques used in playing the *guzheng*, and the basics of how to read *jianpu* notation.

For as many improvements as this plan makes, the relative curricular weight given to this music still places it on the periphery. The introduction to the music is more specific, but still comprises only a single class meeting. This time constraint also means that in the context of the unit, the students hop around the world one day at a time without going into nearly as much depth in any repertoire as western European art music. Students also miss the chance to think critically about connections between musical traditions, which reinforces the idea that musical knowledges are neatly separated by geographic boundaries.

Third Vignette: “Comparative Musics Model”

The final vignette follows the Comparative Musics Model, using only two class periods. This vignette still centers around the *guzheng* and assumes basic knowledge about the instrument. Class begins with a discussion of the social, cultural, and historical importance of *huayin* for the *guzheng* repertoire, based on Haiqiong Deng’s work which traces changes in *guzheng* music culture over time through the use of

huayin.¹⁹ There is also a brief discussion of the history of notation and oral teaching among *guzheng* musicians, which allowed space for the development of a versatile and expressive *huayin* practice that varied across the six different regional schools.

After considering contrasts in *huayin* and right-hand techniques in several traditional songs, the second class period considers modern examples of compositions for the *guzheng*, such as “Mackay” by Taiwanese composer Chihchun Chi-sun Lee.²⁰ “Mackay” blends traditional *guzheng* techniques with whole-tone and chromatic scales, showing how alternate tunings and extended techniques can dramatically influence music written for the instrument. Students watch a lecture recital of the piece by Haiqiong Deng on YouTube and consider the meaning of the dialogue between the disparate musical elements, giving them an opportunity to discuss the role of *huayin*.²¹ This activity leads students to think critically about modern-day relations between Taiwan and mainland China, religion and the effects of western Christian missions through history, and how Lee uses *huayin* and compositional techniques associated with western music to navigate narrative issues of identity and difference.

A discussion of the *guzheng*'s history of oral teaching methods can also lead to a comparison of other music grounded in oral traditions, such as North American old-time music. Between multiple class periods dedicated to the *guzheng* and old-time music, students are prepared for an assignment that considers the interaction of Chinese and American folk traditions in analyses of collaborative songs by Wu Fei and banjo player Abigail Washburn. In analyzing “Wusuli Boat Song/Water Is Wide,” students are asked to consider the form of the song, the overlap between the two folk song texts and their harmonies and melodies, and *guzheng* techniques used by Wu Fei including sparing use of *huayin* (only during an instrumental verse). Much more could be discussed in terms of gender, class, race, and nationality; but even this brief foray into a comparative style of teaching affirms Mohanty's integral point that the local and global constitute each other.

19 Haiqiong Deng, “Musical Change and Continuity of Huayin: The Essence of Chinese Zheng Music” (MM thesis, Florida State University, 2006).

20 The title “Mackay” references the first western-style medical hospital in Taiwan, which was named after a Canadian missionary.

21 Haiqiong Deng, “‘Mackay’: for the 21-string guzheng, composed by Chihchun Chi-sun Lee, lecture/performance by Haiqiong Deng,” March 23, 2021, YouTube Video, 17:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D84tfxmQgIM&t=os>.

Decolonial Pedagogy in Music Theory

These vignettes range from more to less tokenistic. Because the Comparative Musics Model is the most aligned with decolonial pedagogy, I assumed that the third vignette would be the most successful when I set out to write it. Perhaps due to a subconscious move to innocence, I imagined that I would feel satisfied and accomplished after completing the last vignette. Instead, I felt unsatisfied and guilty. Although I have been playing music for decades and writing about music in academic spaces for nearly my entire adult life, I have not pursued long-term study of music outside of the western art music tradition nor do I have expertise in music for the Chinese *guzheng*. I had only a brief exposure to the *guzheng* and its repertoire in one graduate seminar, and I included content on the *guzheng* in order to illustrate the different pedagogical models presented above. I felt that I had used music that has been deeply meaningful to many people as part of a pedagogical experiment. Creating and subsequently presenting these class materials in public settings based on my limited experience felt like an act of colonization—even when attempting to follow tenets of the Comparative Musics Model.

In addition to using the Comparative Musics Model as a guide for incorporating nonwestern music into an existing music theory curriculum, instructors can ensure more ethical results by also engaging in continued and constructive self-critique, reflection, and education. Alissandra Reed (2021) has detailed five “compassionate and practical” strategies for music theorists interested in nonviolent music theory scholarship—strategies that are equally applicable to music theory pedagogy.²² In Reed’s words,

[i]t is imperative that we continually learn antiracist, anti colonial, and feminist practices and continually interrogate our personal values and commitments with respect to violent systems. This (re)education is challenging work, and sometimes we may feel a range of emotions: helplessness, guilt, defensiveness, anger, despair, and more.²³

22 Alissandra Reed, “A Guide to Nonviolent Scholarship in Music Theory,” *Theory and Practice* 46 (2021): 97–104. Reed provides actionable advice for each of her five strategies, which follow: Write about marginalized music—Cite marginalized scholars—Confront the impact of violent power structures and personal agency—Make your work accessible—Pursue nonviolent ideals all the time.

23 *Ibid.*, 102. Reed goes on to note that “scholars with the most institutional power have the greatest responsibility and urgency to learn, critique, and eliminate any potential violent impacts of their actions.”

While not easy, the willingness to accept these uncomfortable emotions is essential if we are to contribute to Hisama's and Lumsden's hope of "[reshaping] music theory with principles of racial and gender justice at its core."²⁴ Catrina Kim (2021) imparts realistic and encouraging guidance for this process in the same volume:

The personal work of self-education is urgent, but it is not easy and cannot be done overnight. I encourage readers to respect this process, acknowledge their own abilities and limitations, and be wary of underestimating the time and energy it will require.²⁵

While the larger curricular reform required of the Comparative Musics Model may be out of reach for some pedagogues, there are decolonial pedagogical techniques that can be implemented in theory classrooms regardless of curricular design. One strategy pays homage to the ethnomusicology "study group" in which students learn experientially in small groups.²⁶ Engaging with music through hands-on experience rather than through traditional written work provides students more than one Eurocentric "way of knowing."²⁷ When the study group experience forms the bulk of students' engagement with music, this discourages a need to conquer knowledge through traditional written tests and quizzes. Study groups and experiential learning may also serve to disrupt classroom power relations by decentering the teacher as the locus of control and knowledge, instead refocusing the learning process as a community effort. An increase in participatory music-making with classmates allows students to conceptualize the participatory nature of much music outside of the narrow slice of presentational music often studied in music theory classrooms and to understand all music as part of a social practice.²⁸

Decolonial pedagogy also involves a softening of the rigid and often impersonal educational system in which music theory resides. One way to push back against the aesthetic hierarchy in music studies is to emphasize the equal importance of local music and student-created music by including them in the course design. Including students in decisions about the course and creating space for individuals to share their

24 Ellie M. Hisama and Rachel Lumsden, "Guest Editors' Note. Diversifying Music Theory: From Theory to Practice," *Theory and Practice* 46 (2021): ix.

25 Catrina Kim, "Issues in Teaching Music Theory Ethically: Reframing University Directives of Antiracist and Decolonized Curricula," *Theory and Practice* 46 (2021): 29.

26 See Hess, "Decolonizing music education" and Michael A. Figueroa, "Decolonizing 'Intro to World Music'?", *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 10, no. 1 (2020): 39-57 for detailed examples of the use of study groups and experiential learning in the music classroom.

27 Including room for multiple "ways of knowing" is one of the central techniques utilized by Attas, "Strategies for Settler Decolonization," 134.

28 See Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 26-29.

analytical ideas, as well as more personal reactions to course content, paves the way for interpersonal connection.

Rachel Lumsden details multiple ways that instructors can incorporate feminist pedagogy in the music theory classroom, including small-group work, collaborative discussion leading, and strategies for cultivating an “ethic of care.”²⁹ As Lumsden demonstrates, feminist pedagogy’s “focus on how structures of power operate, both within and outside the classroom” and teaching strategies that resist a “solely hierarchical model with the professor as ‘the sage on the stage’” aim to actively dismantle systems of oppression—leading to classroom experiences that can be truly empowering or transformative for students.³⁰

In their 2018 manifesto on decolonizing the music survey class, Maria Ryan and David Chavannes propose multiple decolonial techniques including the idea of compassionate listening:

What if, along with our students, we practiced listening with an empathetic curiosity, one that invites us to try describing something of what we hear and how it makes us feel? What if we listened with a compassionate desire to be present, both with others who have listened to this music before us, and with those who are listening to it alongside us?³¹

Compassionate listening allows pedagogues to contextualize their classrooms within a specific time and place in a way that creates awareness of the intersection of local and global. By relinquishing some control, pedagogues can guide students to learn through this empathetic desire to listen.

Whether instructors ultimately choose to incorporate nonwestern music in the music theory classroom, we can still engage in decolonial pedagogy by naming our epistemological frames.³² Robin Attas describes the process of uncovering

29 See Rachel Lumsden, “Enriching Classroom Discussions: Some Strategies from Feminist Pedagogy,” in *The Norton Guide to Teaching Music Theory*, ed. Rachel Lumsden and Jeffrey Swinkin (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018): 313–330.

30 Ibid., 315.

31 Chavannes and Ryan, “Decolonizing the Music Survey: A Manifesto for Action.” June 15, 2018. <http://www.dchavannes.com/read/2018/6/15/decolonizing-music-survey>.

32 Ryan and Chavannes include “Nam[ing] your epistemological frames” among their actionable items for decolonizing the music survey class: “Your teaching, along with the teaching materials you use, is inevitably based upon certain theoretical, ideological, and ontological assumptions. Be sure that you know what these are, and that you bring these to the foreground of your teaching.” Chavannes goes on to note, “naming your epistemological frames might have a tremendous impact on the learning of everyone in the room, including you. Of course, this demands humility.” See also Palfy and Gilson, “The Hidden Curriculum in the Music Theory Classroom,” 2018.

the Eurocentric elements of music theory for her students in her work towards decolonizing a popular music analysis course:

I thus increased Indigenous content in terms of repertoire, but this still left the second half of music theory course content: analytical approach. Given the historical orientation of the discipline as described previously, it is no surprise that Eurocentric analytical methods and ways of thinking about music (including the definition of what it means to analyze music in the first place) are the often-unspoken norm in the discipline. I paired six different analytical methods with each of my artist-focused units, and all but one method was based on standard analytical practices in my field. In remaining mostly true to Eurocentric analytical practice and epistemology, I did not escape a Eurocentric focus, but I was able to expose this colonial focus to students through critical discussions at the end of each unit.³³

Naming our epistemological frames may also look like renaming a course to more accurately reflect the course content. Catrina Kim describes a hypothetical class with a unit titled “world music,”

in which students sample two or three different non-Western musical cultures, and another unit titled “form,” which focuses on eighteenth-century sonata form in German-speaking lands. The former topic is extremely broad, whereas the latter topic is extremely focused with a misleadingly broad title.³⁴

In the case of a semester-long course on the latter topic, perhaps an instructor would consider the course title “18th-Century Sonatas Forms: Germany and Austria.” Another familiar yet misleadingly broad title is “Music Theory I.” Whose music, whose theories, to whom, and for whom? While many instructors lack the institutional power to change course names such as this, they can name their frames by being honest with students about the theoretical or analytic assumptions of the course that might otherwise appear as objective fact. Ellie Hisama writes that “[m]usic theory as a field is often regarded as neutral, technical, and formalist, a foundational part of an undergraduate curriculum that is exempt from discussions of issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, citizenship, economics, politics, and so forth.”³⁵ Questioning the seemingly objective bases of our fields of knowledge is decolonial thinking. Humberto Maturana’s phrase “objectivity in parentheses” highlights the contingent nature of objectivity itself. Acknowledging the absence of a singular, objective truth can be daunting—or it can lead to greater compassion. In Maturana’s words,

33 Robin Attas, “Strategies for Settler Decolonization,” 133.

34 Kim, “Issues in Teaching Music Theory Ethically,” 35–36.

35 Ellie M. Hisama, “Considering Race and Ethnicity in the Music Theory Classroom,” in *The Norton Guide to Teaching Music Theory*, ed. Rachel Lumsden and Jeffrey Swinkin (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018): 252.

When one puts objectivity in parentheses, all views, all verses in the multiverse are equally valid. Understanding this, you lose the passion for changing the other.³⁶

The decolonial option privileges pluralism, multiculturalism, and importantly, more than one Eurocentric base of knowledge.

In a critical reflection on their 2018 manifesto, Chavannes and Ryan acknowledge that: living in the US and participating in North Atlantic academic discourse largely means contending with Western thought. It is possible to bend, stretch, and even break parts of this tradition in pursuit of truth, and this can be done from within the tradition itself or by constellating truths from Western and non-Western traditions.³⁷

Conclusion

It is not necessary to eschew western art music or theories in music theory classroom. Rather, by treating them as some of many “equally valid” musical traditions and knowledges, instructors interested in decolonial pedagogy may create in their classrooms a space for eliciting personal transformative experiences for students and instructor alike.

Bottom-up curricular changes that incorporate aspects of the Comparative Musics Model are already happening in some music programs across North America. But many individual instructors may not have the individual or institutional power to enact radical changes in their curricula. In lieu of these broader changes, decolonial thinking encourages instructors and students alike to make space in their classrooms for pluralistic ways of experiencing music. The decolonial option requires us to continuously rethink ourselves and our relation to land, culture, and music. When we are able to see beyond the acultural, objective guise that has been afforded to western art music, we are better equipped to shift our pedagogy to incorporate a greater range of music and perspectives. Decolonial pedagogy encourages us to engage with all music in an ethical and empathetic way and emboldens us to embrace the discomfort of accepting objectivity in parentheses.

36 Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 28 (translated from Maturana, “Biologie der Sozialität”).

37 Chavannes and Ryan, “A Critical Reflection on ‘Decolonizing the Music Survey.’” August 26, 2022. <http://www.dchavannes.com/read/2022/8/26/a-critical-reflection-on-decolonizing-the-music-survey>.

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