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Review Article
'Chinatown' and Global Operatic Knowledge

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Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 415pp.

In recent years opera studies have taken a distinctly global and migratory turn: Nancy Rao's *Chinatown Opera Theater* is a notable example. Rao's book sheds new light on the art form's transpacific networks, Cantonese immigrant communities and their highly racialised experience of everyday entertainment in early twentieth-century America, thereby 'strip[ping] the veneer of exoticism from [southern] Chinese [i.e., Cantonese] opera, placing it firmly within the bounds of American music and a profoundly American experience'.[1] Still more illuminating is Rao's focus on the Chinatown theatre companies, their contracting of touring performers and their role in transoceanic commerce. Woven into the book is an intimately connected narrative of Cantonese opera in the 1920s, encompassing San Francisco, Vancouver, New York, Honolulu and (to a lesser extent) Havana. The selection of these locations is no coincidence, given their significance in the interwar years as port cities linked within imperial steamship networks, amidst the part-conflicting, part-intersecting agenda of dominant and emergent empires (for instance, Japan and the United States, in the case of the latter).

This historical geography notwithstanding, one might be tempted to situate Rao's project within the existing Anglo-American scholarship on Cantonese opera, specifically as it has been approached as a genre of ethnohistorical interest. The work of Bell Yung and Wing Chung Ng comes immediately to mind: their monographs have become the go-to references for specialist and non-specialist readers alike, valued for their detailed coverage of such topics as the stylistic elements of Cantonese opera, its urbanisation in the Pearl River Delta in southern China and its transformation as diaspora theatre in Southeast Asia and further afield, in North America.[2] Yet, *Chinatown Opera Theater* does not seem to have been envisaged solely to investigate and explain a 'non-Western' genre. Rao's project does more, in fact, pushing or even breaking what may strike the postcolonial historian as the Anglo-European boundaries of institutional operatic knowledge. In light of that

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1 www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/35rxb6yr9780252040566.html.
2 Bell Yung, *Cantonese Opera: Performance as Creative Process* (Cambridge, 1989); Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Urbana, 2017).

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intervention, the book's extensive cross-examination of Chinese- and English-language sources is an especially salient attribute. Rao's acknowledgements are revealing here, exposing her archival footprint across California, British Columbia and the US east coast; and across Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei. Her visits to the various local branches of the US National Archives and Record Administration, the Berkeley Ethnic Studies Library, Seattle's Wing Luke Museum and the Chinese Opera Information Centre in Hong Kong – to name but a few – similarly tell of a multi-faceted engagement with transpacific connections. That engagement, too, constitutes a welcome parallel to European opera and its transatlantic understandings as a migratory culture.[3] As such, Rao's project brings about a decentring of opera studies through another transoceanic perspective, hitherto associated to varying degrees with the dissemination of American popular music in early twentieth-century Asia.[4]

Rao's Pacific focus thus speaks to the increased globality of opera studies in the twenty-first century, an invigorating state of affairs in which the field is no longer simply synonymous with European/-related opera. The expansion of what, in publishing terms at least, has been an Anglo-American enterprise makes possible new best practices, concerned not only with opera studies' forays beyond Europe, but also with profound epistemological questions that need to be confronted back in the English-speaking academy. Indeed, it is arguably within the established seat of opera studies that the post-European contours of operatic knowledge must be charted and reflected upon. Rao's book, then, raises the possibility of an augmented operatic knowledge, a take on opera studies that is at once guided and unrestricted by markers of 'provenance': by repertoire, for example, or by the aesthetics of staging and performance. Put another way, such knowledge is no longer structured around the old dichotomy of European and non-European opera, a shift which also signals a departure from the Western-ethnocentricity of studying Cantonese opera as an 'indigenous' genre historically tied and historiographically restored to its identified origins. Rao's work as a cross-cultural researcher, too, allows her to trace modern Cantonese opera in the opposite direction, as a partial uprooting of an ostensibly established tradition. Her varied use of primary materials, moreover – extending from playbills, maps, newspapers and production photos to chamber of commerce petitions and the theatres' visa-like applications to the US Immigration Bureau – bears a resemblance to the 'thick' archival stuff that informs similar migratory histories, especially those of colonial opera in the early twentieth century, and of post-/European opera and its racial discontents in later decades, amidst successive waves of political

[3] Recent examples include Charlotte Bentley, 'Between the Frontier and the French Quarter: Operatic Travel Writing and Nineteenth-Century New Orleans', and Roberto Ignacio Díaz, 'Underground in Buenos Aires: A Chamber Opera at the Teatro Colón', in *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House*, ed. Suzanne Aspden (Chicago, 2019), 105–18 and 234–48.

[4] See E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham, NC, 2001); Elizabeth L. Enriquez, *Appropriation of Colonial Broadcasting: A History of Early Radio in the Philippines, 1922–1946* (Quezon, 2008); and Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham, NC, 2001).

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decolonisation.[5] This discourse of postcolonial musicological thought is doubtless encouraging. But *Chinatown Opera Theater* should not be viewed simply as a step forward in developing and even democratising a global operatic knowledge. The very cultivation of that knowledge also warrants some further reflections: what are its wider epistemological implications, and how and why do they matter?

I

The first point has to do with the entwined dynamics between the transnational and the local, in particular Rao's interweaving of transpacific business networks, the Chinatown theatre economy and the performative prospects and challenges peculiar to that economy. Rao provides context for these developments with the Canton-Hong Kong strike of the mid-1920s, and its initially adverse impact on local opera stars such as Bai Jurong and Bai's subsequent residency at San Francisco's Great China Theatre. Although the aforementioned strike – a corollary to anti-imperial movements across Republican and treaty port China – put most singers out of work, it also meant alternative employment, Rao observes, for Bai and other celebrity actors. Having been contracted through the Great China's agents in Hong Kong, they were then brought across the 'Cantonese Pacific', from southern China to the US west coast, to take the stage in such locations as San Francisco. As Rao documents, Bai gave well over a hundred performances in both lead and supporting roles, and introduced various new operas during his residency, culminating in a farewell appearance at the Great China in March 1927 that saw the staging of fourteen operas in two weeks – programming that Rao describes as a 'feast of contemporary Cantonese opera repertoire' (197).

Strikingly, though, the transnational effects of this operatic migration were met at once with commercial success and with an unexpected fate. In Rao's narrative, the conditions and practicalities of (re)enacting Cantonese opera are thrown into sharp relief, as Bai and similar figures found themselves negotiating their star status in novel if not unknown environments. Their undertaking of minor roles to honour contract obligations, Rao explains, would have been unheard of in southern China. The same economy that afforded these singers employment (and by extension performative agency) thus also detached them from the operatic norms and protocols to which they were long accustomed.

Bai's and the other singers' sentiments are largely absent from Rao's narrative, as are details of the particular predicaments they were faced with. This suggests additional scope for research, building on Bai's memoir (which Rao draws upon) as a primary source. Herein lies an opportunity to seek out the performers' own voices:

[5] Relevant examples include meLê yamomo, 'Global Currents, Musical Streams: European Opera in Colonial Southeast Asia', *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film* 44 (2017), 54–74; Yvonne Liao, 'Empires in Rivalry: Opera Concerts and Foreign Territoriality in Shanghai, 1930–1945', in *Operatic Geographies* (Chicago, 2019), 148–61; and Juliana Pistorius, 'The Eoan Group and the Politics of Coloured Opera in Apartheid South Africa' (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2017).

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not only as transnational cosmopolitan subjects, but also as individuals embroiled in a matrix of business networks and the theatre economy to which those networks gave rise. One might, for example, consider Sarah Collins's and Dana Gooley's advocacy of a new critical cosmopolitanism in music studies, namely the idea of cosmopolitanism as 'stance-taking' on the part of the historical actor *and* of the historian. As Collins and Gooley observe it, '[the actor's and historian's] cosmopolitan stance does not negate modes of belonging and cannot be their substitute. Rather, it takes distance from existing attachments, in a manner that limits the beholder's ability to invest in them exclusively or unilaterally.'[6]

With that potential dis/orientation in mind, what more can be said, first, about Bai's circumstances as an artist, given his involvement in Cantonese opera across the Pacific? And, second, about his acceptance, willingly or not, of the attendant realities of venturing abroad? The statistics cited earlier for his Great China residency, though impressive, can obscure as much as they reveal about Bai's role as a transnationally contracted performer. By the same token, to what degree can or should the historian's representation of transnational cosmopolitanism include the unanticipated experiences across the ocean of Bai and his fellow celebrities, who were disengaged, albeit temporarily, from their familiar artistic and social milieus? To put this in bolder terms: can the historian's global outlook not also allow a rethinking of 'transnational' Cantonese opera, which has been portrayed thus far as a single ecosystem? Such a revision would complicate apparently defined trajectories, for instance the recruitment in British colonial Hong Kong of southern Chinese performers for Chinatown theatres across the Pacific. To state this point even more forcefully, further gaps are exposed in the new operatic knowledge that has (re)discovered the 'other' ocean and the musical commerce embedded in it. While Rao justifiably examines transnational and local phenomena as inseparable concerns, mutable questions of agency *within* the hybrid that is Cantonese Pacific opera remain uncertain, and relatively unexplored.

II

Such questions notwithstanding, the visible extension of opera studies and its global parameters beyond Europe and the Atlantic continues to be an enticing feature of Rao's narrative. As she discusses it, Cantonese opera – though a time-honoured tradition – gains additional traction not only as a transplanted culture, but also as a complex status quo, often imbricated with questions of race, place and space. Indeed, the particular Chinatown theatres on which Rao focuses are crucial: among others, Jock Ming On and Lok Tin Tsau in New York, Sheng Ping in Vancouver, Great China and the Mandarin in San Francisco, Teatro Chung Wah in Havana and Kue Hing in Honolulu, a subsidiary of its namesake in Vancouver. Rao brings to light the day-to-day implications for these theatres of racial legislation in the United States,

[6] Sarah Collins and Dana Gooley, 'Music and the New Cosmopolitanism: Problems and Possibilities', *The Musical Quarterly* 99 (2017), 156–7.

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beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, with its 'increasingly stringent' laws and rulings: 'After the 1882 act came the Exclusion Act of 1888 (also known as the Scott Act), which openly abrogated US treaties with China by revoking the right of free travel for Chinese laborers in and out of the United States, and the Geary Act of 1892, with its added requirement of registration and certification' (47). Rao goes on to paint an intricate picture of the many documents and administrative parties involved, providing a glimpse of the (intentionally) protracted procedures that would have typified the theatres' applications for actors' admission permits, renewals and so on (53).

This arbitrarily copious paperwork is symptomatic of Chinatown opera as a de facto censored culture and, above all, as a racialised experience and site of social control. As heavily regulated spaces, the theatres became operative as part-negotiated, part-disenfranchised places: their *raison d'être* as venues and presenters was inextricably bound up with the US government's deterrence of Chinese immigration. Rao notes the fear and frustration engendered as a result: '[T]he requirement that the [theatres] apply for extension of their permits every six months made them vulnerable … . The permit could be used as a tool to virtually terminate the existence of a [theatre]. This precariousness reveals the profound tenuousness of the actors' rights: they were only a thin hair's breadth away from becoming illegal immigrants' (55).

The significance of race, place and space is anything but peculiar to Chinatown opera theatres of the 1920s, of course. But precisely because of that, the theatres in question also share some striking (if surprising) parallels with colonial theatres of the early twentieth century, such as the opera house in Hanoi. As Michael McClellan has shown, the French government in Indochina used the construction of theatres in Hanoi, Haiphong and Saigon as a means to project their command over Southeast Asia and to showcase French cultural and racial superiority. Opera thus 'constitute[d] a basic tool of [the Third Republic] empire', with the opera houses 'contribut[ing] to the reorganisation of the colony's physical space', while the operas themselves 'reified the lessons of colonial order' with an emphasis on the French canon; for example, Gounod's *Faust* and Bizet's *Carmen*.[7] Yet despite the racialised appropriation of opera as grand architecture (place), and as social partitioning (space), McClellan ultimately highlights the flaws of French imperial performance in colonial Hanoi:

> The theatre was a byproduct of [the colonial] community's attempt to overcome its separation from and nostalgia for what it had left behind, but opera, which was expected to mediate between the metropole and the colony and draw them closer, ultimately reinforced Hanoi's peripheral status … . The size, location, function and opulence of the building heralded the power of empire, but its irregular use and mediocre performances in combination with a lack of Vietnamese interest discredited it as an emblem of authority.[8]

[7] Michael McClellan, 'Performing Empire: Opera in Colonial Hanoi', *Journal of Musicological Research* 22 (2003), 135–6 and 159.

[8] McClellan, 'Performing Empire', 166.

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To put it simply, French imperial ideology fell flat. More intriguingly, though, its particular configuration of race, place and space – the colonial 'civilising mission' writ large – was not all that dissimilar from the US government's regulation in the early twentieth century of the Chinatown theatres. That regulation can be understood as a white-influenced policy against an 'ethnic minority', a minority likely to be perceived at the time as a threat to so-called American, that is, predominantly Anglo-European, values in a multi-immigrant nation.

Notwithstanding the controlled proliferation of the Chinatown theatres in the 1920s, more can be said about their residual effects over time, and specifically about 'Chinatown' as an historiographic category. Rao's narrative is startlingly subdued on that front, despite succeeding in contributing another essential dimension to Chinatown studies of recent decades: by 'locating Chinatown theatres' (8), Rao gives voice to an important site hitherto muted in portrayals of Chinatown. In that sense, her approach ties in with the revisionist efforts elsewhere in Chinatown studies; for example, the work of sociologist Jan Lin. Of the (mis)perceptions of an immigrant dump, Lin observes:

> Chinatown has traditionally occupied a chimerical position in the American popular imagination … . An Orientalist patina of mystery and danger surrounds Chinatown; people are somewhat fearful and wary when walking there. Popular films such as Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1975) and Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985) have contributed to this iconic representation. Urban residents often mentally situate Chinatown alongside the 'combat zone' or 'red light district' and the African American 'ghetto' in the transitional zones that surround the central city … . The other image that the general public carries of Chinatown is that of the exotic foreign enclave, a dense rookery of restaurants and street emporiums tucked within the vestigial tenement recesses of the modern metropolis.[9]

Lin's attempt to debunk such ideas of 'Chinatown' is realised further in Rao's exposé of the theatres' everyday life and survival in the 1920s, which also echoes what urban historian Marie Wong has noted with regard to Portland's Chinatown: 'During the height of restrictive Chinese immigration laws, the ethnic community responded by developing social institutions [such as family associations] for the new immigrants … Chinatown was [thus] a haven where immigrants could share the common experiences and challenges of living in a new country.'[10] What Rao's narrative facilitates, along similar lines, is a historical tune-in to the theatres as a homegrown institution away from home, one that was established alongside numerous kinship associations and characteristic of the incipient North American Chinatown. Moreover, by examining the Chinatown theatres as a post-/migratory phenomenon, Rao destabilises 'Chinatown' as a category with tenaciously pejorative connotations, engaging her audience instead in an alternative historical imagination, thereby breaking out of the confines of an 'exotic foreign enclave'. In adopting that approach and, above all, in reconstructing the musical-sonic environment of

[9] Jan Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change* (Minneapolis, 1998), 1.
[10] Marie Rose Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon* (Seattle, 2004), 264.

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that so-called enclave, Rao provides a much-needed auditory dimension to revisionist histories of North American Chinatowns and their transdisciplinary historiography.

III

Over-emphasising that dimension, however, might also obscure Cantonese opera's global status as a historical discourse: its 'worldness', that is, or its (in)ability to cross borders, having made the journey across the Pacific. The book's publicity sheet is a giveaway: its headline, 'The Transformation of Chinese Music into American Music in the Early Twentieth Century', raises an intriguing question about Cantonese Pacific opera *as* American music, not least the conception of American music as it is conventionally understood. The historiography of American music, as Rao sees it, has largely been aligned with the transatlantic perspective. Indeed, she asks: 'How does one construct and reintroduce [Chinatown] history into the study of American musical life?', and goes on to warn, '[i]t does Chinese American music a disservice to consider Cantonese opera in the 1920s as an innocuous foreign music tradition in multicultural America' (11). The extensive attention Rao accords both touring performers and the various productions at the Chinatown theatres doubtless helps to root Cantonese opera more firmly in the American musical landscape. She explains, for example, how financial success in the early 1920s of troupes based initially in Vancouver had a ripple effect across the port cities of Boston, New York and others, creating nothing short of an 'opera renaissance' (145).

Yet the concomitant question of how a racialised Cantonese opera might redefine the historiography of American music is not posed. Given the élan with which the book surveys opera's proliferation from the west to the east coast (and back, across the Pacific, in the case of Honolulu), it would have been opportune also to examine Cantonese opera in terms of its imbrication with related contemporaneous phenomena in early twentieth-century North America, such as vaudeville and the popular theatre industry. Cross-examining these entertainments would bring Cantonese opera into productive conversation with existing American historiography, potentially relieving the former of its misassigned duty as a 'foreign' musical tradition. Just as Charles Hiroshi Garrett, in discussing the Broadway song 'Chinatown, My Chinatown', highlights the ways in which America's music industry 'rehash[es] age-old Asian stereotypes for contemporary audiences',[11] there is a need, conversely, for an exploration of Cantonese opera's subversive power – especially the questions it can ask in return about early twentieth-century America as a multicultural but contested nation, at once thriving and divided.

The import across the Pacific of Cantonese opera ultimately seems more noteworthy in Rao's narrative as a post-/migratory culture than as a means by which to attempt historiographic border-crossing. What that exposes, then, is a gap between

[11] Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 2008), 164.

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the operatic knowledge of Chinatown theatres, and any scrutiny of the degree to which Cantonese opera might epistemologically open up new avenues and problematise the previously 'closed' scholarship within which the American musical past has been reconstructed. By expanding operatic knowledge beyond Europe and the Atlantic, but not quite addressing Cantonese opera's globality in its local environments, Rao's narrative appears to portray Cantonese opera in Chinatown as an *entirely* unique phenomenon – an approach that risks detracting from its potential to evaluate an immigrant opera and the extent of its global status within a racially fraught nation.

Not taking that global status as a given could afford other opportunities, too. It might, for instance, go some way towards capturing the emergent and divergent identities of Chinatown opera through the first and second generations of immigrants, including such nascent local communities as opera's young audiences in the 1920s. To be sure, alongside her archival characters, Rao engages with a number of living subjects from the period concerned – no mean feat in light of their age and the inevitably small 'sample size' to which she had access. On the basis of that field work she is able to state:

> Cantonese opera served many different purposes, not least for children. For many of them the opera [theatre] was a playground, used for activities from playing hide-and-seek in the balcony to crawling onto the edge of the stage until they were shooed away by ushers or audience. Young children were accustomed to grabbing onto the coattails of adults to enter the [theatres]. Each day fans eagerly awaited the playbills with pictures of their [favourite] performers, which they cut out and collected in treasure chests or scrapbooks … . In a form of 'practical mimicry', the youth adopted the gestures, movements, and postures of opera in the environment of the [theatre] culture with or without fully comprehending them. (7)

Rao's interest in personal anecdotes is doubtless valuable, for it adds fascinating detail to her transnational narrative. Her use of these private sources, however, begs the question as to whether Chinatown opera and its subjectivities, as experienced over time in the theatres, could have been brought to the fore even more as a critique of continuity and change. If pursued, such a question would not only have enriched Rao's near-exclusive focus on performers and productions, but also have enabled *Chinatown Opera Theater* – a work primarily substantiated by institutional archival sources – to dovetail with related albeit more contemporary studies of Asian American identities, in which field work and personal reminiscences play a crucial part in exploring music, culture and experientiality. Some of the queries posed by these studies are instructive here. In *Soundtracks of Asian America*, for example, Grace Wang asks: 'How do Asian Americans use music to construct narratives of self, race, class, and belonging?'[12] While it would be far-fetched, if not a misnomer, to label the first and second generations of immigrants 'Asian Americans', the Chinatown theatres of the 1920s and their affective registers – beyond the soundworld Rao recreates, beyond the visual traces of 'powder and rouge' (133) – would

[12] Grace Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America: Navigating Race through Musical Performance* (Durham, NC, 2015), 3.

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similarly benefit from a consideration of how a partially uprooted Cantonese opera was internalised in different ways by its 'core' and 'peripheral' participants. Put another way, Cantonese Pacific opera surely lends itself to an archival-ethnographic history that is concerned equally with institutional and private archives, and with the theatre operators' predicaments and other sentiments. This intensified, subjectivised purview would facilitate closer engagement with how opera mattered (and did not matter) to those familiar and less familiar with it; what opera meant to disparate, theatre-going individuals within the local Chinatown demographic; and how opera seeps, over time, into a (fragmented) collective memory in the history-writing present.

IV

What nonetheless characterises *Chinatown Opera Theater* is a Pacific global operatic knowledge that ventures beyond and away from the Atlantic, with profound implications for how the art form can be understood to connect such nodes as San Francisco, Vancouver, New York and Honolulu, and the Pearl River Delta in southern China from which it originated. With that mapping comes not only an awareness of opera's entanglements with port cities and steamship routes linking North America and East Asia, but also a salient reminder of the 'master narrative' that is European imperial history, given impetus by the movement of peoples, ideas and goods as analysed through the lens of British, French and other dominant agendas across the centuries and continents. What use can thus be made of the 'Chinatown opera theatre' in troubling that 'master narrative'? This question has broad significance considering that modern European imperialism and Industrial Age capitalism, in the form of territorial and/or ideological expansion, became ubiquitous historical phenomena, even leading to anti-capitalist empires in the twentieth century such as the Cold War Soviet empire.[13]

Rao's narrative does not respond to the embedded theme of world power and the need to relate it back to historiography. Her focus throughout is on contextualising the 'world' of the theatres, and this is nowhere more evident than in the way she concludes her book:

> To chronicle the history of Chinatown [theatres] … is to challenge the invisibility of opera performers, to hear and watch them through the words left by [opera's] fans, to reimagine it in its full richness and complexity, to relocate Chinese opera [theatre] in both local communities and transnational circuits, to reconstruct its image, and to build a bridge between the past and the present. (320)

For decades, though, there has been a prevalent European influence on histories of cross-cultural encounter. With its allusion to intersecting European and non-European, existing and emergent imperial networks, a study of Chinatown

[13] See, for example, Kiril Tomoff, *Virtuosi Abroad: Soviet Music and Imperial Competition during the Early Cold War, 1945–1958* (Ithaca, 2015).

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opera theatres has the potential to dilute Eurocentricity from within. The touring celebrity Bai Jurong, for example, returned to China from San Francisco via the SS *Taiyō Maru* (197) – an ocean liner built in Imperial Germany that began its service in the early 1910s for the Hamburg-South America Line, then subsequently for the US navy, before being transferred to Britain and, in 1920, to the Imperial Japanese government. The criss-crossing across time and place of imperial military interests and the strategic importance of the oceanic vessel as a national asset bring to the fore a complex, maritime territoriality in which the Chinatown theatres and their touring performers were (inadvertently) enmeshed. Although this backstory is not made manifest in Rao's narrative, her bridging of Pacific port cities, Chinatown opera and its musical commerce nevertheless highlights a particular, historical geography reshaped by the increasing presences on the world map of two new non-European players – the USA and Imperial Japan – thereby challenging the existing knowledge of European imperial networks.

Moving beyond the 'world' of the theatres in the 1920s, and reappraising the contemporary world order also raises the final question of this review article: what else can an examination of Chinatown opera theatres accomplish more generally, in light of the burgeoning efforts within the Anglo-American academy to decolonise received historical knowledge? Perhaps surprisingly, such an examination finds parallels in some of the recent work on culture and technology in the interwar years, especially the exploration of recorded vernacular musics in and beyond European colonial empires. Michael Denning, for instance, points to a 'world musical revolution' that was constitutive of a recording boom of these musics, and more importantly, to the attendant 'decolonisation of the ear':

> [T]his noise uprising was prophetic: it not only preceded but prepared the way for the decolonization of legislatures and literatures. These vernacular phonograph musics reverberated across the colonial world [and its ports], a cultural revolution in sound. Inheriting the harmonies and instruments of colonial musics, they embodied the contradictions of the anticolonial struggles: as 'modern dance musics' – a common phrase of the time – they were scarred with the hierarchies of class and spectrums of color that shaped the dance halls and nightclubs, shebeens and streets, they inhabited. But if they prefigured what [Frantz] Fanon called 'the trials and tribulations of national consciousness', they also, with their traveling if untranslatable names – son and samba, ṭarab and marabi, kroncong and jazz, rumba and hula – prefigured a new world, a 'third' world, culturally as well as politically independent. Music did not simply sustain the soul in the struggle; the decolonization of the territory was made possible by the decolonization of the ear.[14]

If, as Denning frames it, phonograph technology and its colonial dissemination gave rise to vernacular musics and anti-colonial struggles, Chinatown opera, conversely, can be said to instigate another 'noise uprising'. That is to say, it throws into chaos the familiar 'binary logic' by which colonial influence and anti-colonial expression have come to be heard and understood (and despite the conspicuous

[14] Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (New York, 2015), 38.

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prominence from the nineteenth century onwards of capitalist colonial empires and their aggressive expansion across land and sea). Equally, if not more importantly, the development across the Pacific of Chinatown opera sheds light on what was neither a colonial nor an anti-colonial music culture in the 1920s. That such a culture was practically dependent upon imperial networks at the time, without getting entirely subsumed into them, however, shapes an inevitably ambiguous global knowledge that at once affirms and negates the primacy of those networks. Examining Chinatown opera, in other words, has a decolonising potential that is significant not as a mandate to reinstate indigenous voices in (their) dispossessed lands,[15] but rather, as a way to interrogate assumed understandings of imperial history in and beyond the West, and what a plural global history may thus entail.

Indeed, by tracing a migratory non-colonial culture from Canton to North America, writing about Chinatown opera may not prioritise upfront the indigenous mandate. But it can nevertheless gain traction through its acknowledgement, however implicit, of 'decolonising' as an epistemology *of* global knowledge. As such, this 'decolonising' mindset can explore and put to use different ways of knowing, increasingly advocated by and within Anglo-American academies of the twenty-first century. As Gurminder Bhambra and other scholars in Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies have recently observed: '"Decolonising" involves a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies … [It] remains a contested term, consisting of a heterogeneity of viewpoints, approaches, political projects and normative concerns. This multiplicity of perspectives should not be surprising given the various historical and political sites of decolonisation that span both the globe and [five hundred] years of history.'[16] Moreover, despite the institutional ethics promoted in the West of bridging the Global North and South, further questions must continue to be asked about that agenda, especially regarding its motivations to decolonise (be it the 'white male' curriculum or the university), and the re/distributed, political economy of learning that such an agenda purports to achieve. The complexities of that agenda and of realising diversity matter, too, given the lingering Anglo-/European values with which colonial discourse, postcolonial theory and decolonial praxis are all inextricably bound up. *Chinatown Opera Theater*, with its new global knowledge, provides in that sense a compelling alternative space in which to contemplate – for opera studies and the academy of which it is a part – the ongoing and inescapable anxieties of Western-reflexive scholarship.

[15] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (2012), 1–40.

[16] Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, 'Introduction: Decolonising the University?', in *Decolonising the University*, ed. Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu (London, 2018), 2.

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