

## High-Key Hierarchy: Coloniality of Knowledge in Music

Jonathan Provost

Throughout the era of colonialism, a hierarchical social, economic, political, and cultural world order was imposed on the dominated—a hierarchy where the colonizing Europeans always ended up on top.

This hierarchical paradigm, coloniality, did not disappear with the end of traditional colonialism. It continues to ravage nations worldwide today. When discussing its cultural and epistemic aspects, one refers to the coloniality of knowledge. One can see how it has aptly been used as a tool by dominant groups to dismiss, subjugate, and even erase cultures they deem inferior and threatening.

For example, academics in Nazi Germany vilified art created by Jewish people, Black people, homosexuals, and others as a way to demonize them. Likewise, Europeans characterized Native animism as uncivilized and barbaric compared to the evolved monotheism.<sup>1</sup> Music, which is obviously an immensely popular and important form of art that plays an integral role in shaping one's identity, is no exception.

## Coloniality of Knowledge

As told by Quijano, the “coloniality of knowledge” begins with a simple foundational truth: Western knowledge is superior to that of non-Western knowledge. It is the only rational, civilized culture, which makes it *inherently* greater than the cultures of the different, dominated Other.<sup>2</sup>

This idea of rationality is important, as the cultural superiority is presented as objective fact based on rational and scientific thought. These “objective” statements are made by people who are conceived as authorities.<sup>3</sup> An easy example of this mindset would be Macaulay's 1835 “Minute upon Indian Education,” where he claimed that his research on Sanskrit and Arabic literature led him to the conclusion that even its greatest works paled in comparison to the most basic of British literature.<sup>4</sup>

With this hierarchy established, a Eurocentric knowledge becomes invaluable to conducting oneself as a cultured person—a *human* even. Humanity becomes measurable, and European knowledge becomes the ruler. For this reason, the colonized's knowledge is pushed aside as lesser and savage, so as to be replaced by the colonizer's knowledge.

This was infamously the case with Canada's policy towards Native tribes in the country, as demonstrated by the residential school system that tore native children from their family in order to “kill the Indian in the child” and raise them within the parameters of whiteness and Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

The final nail in this coffin is the fact that, despite the push from authorities to act Western

<sup>1</sup> Michael Baker, “Modernity/Coloniality and Eurocentric Education: Towards a Post-Occidental Self-Understanding of the Present,” *Policy Futures in Education* 10, no. 1 (2012), 4–22.

<sup>2</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 176.

<sup>3</sup> Shehla Burney, “The World, the Text, and the Teacher: Contrapuntal Analysis and Secular Criticism,” *Counterpoints* 417 (2012): 122.

<sup>4</sup> Burney, “The World, the Text, and the Teacher,” 121.

<sup>5</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *They Came for the Children* (Winnipeg, MB: Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication, 2012), 85.

and forget their original knowledge system, the colonized will never be recognized as Western by those same authorities. This is discussed extensively by Du Bois with his idea of the veil—a veil through which all colonized peoples must learn to view reality.<sup>6</sup> All of these steps to delegitimize the colonized and their culture are done to cement the West's ability to rule and dominate.

## Dismissal

The coloniality of knowledge exists in today's musical industry.

Just as “rational” Western thought from British authorities was used to dismiss the literature of Sanskrit and Arab cultures nearly two hundred years ago, we can see similar processes happening today with music. I think here in particular of the discussion surrounding rap music, a style of musical delivery born in and closely intertwined with Black culture, where rhythmic speech is performed over an instrumental beat.<sup>7</sup>

Rap, a musical style with a heavy focus on black experience, is quite quick to be dismissed for various reasons by Western audiences and “authorities.” One of the most common of these dismissals is the discussion surrounding the subject matter in rap music, namely: sex, drugs, and violence. The argument that rap is dangerous because of the subject matter of its songs, and that it should thus be kept away from susceptible audiences, is not an uncommon one.

US Presidential candidates in the 1990s were quite vocal in calling rap wrong because it

supposedly encouraged cop killing. A more recent example is conservative pundit Geraldo Rivera's comment on Kendrick Lamar's performance of “Alright” at the BET Awards, claiming that “hip hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism.”<sup>8</sup>

Beyond its content, rap has also been rejected as a form of music entirely. This narrative was pushed very recently by influential conservative political commentator, Ben Shapiro, who claimed that rap was not music because it lacked melody and harmony, two of the three main elements that define music.<sup>9</sup> Though this conception of music is laughably rigid, it is important to note that the terms used are based on musical theory developed in the West. For example, this theory of what constitutes music can be seen in Jean-Philippe Rameau's 18<sup>th</sup>-century book, *Treatise on Harmony*. This treatise aimed to create a *rational* foundation for music, and this same form of positivist thinking is now being used by Shapiro to dismiss non-Western music that does not fit this 300-year-old model.

In both these methods of dismissing rap, people who are seen as authority figures “prove” the inferiority of this expression of culture compared to those that are either more wholesome or more sophisticated—that is, those from the West. When Black musical forms are dismissed through these methods, the obvious end result is the lack of empowerment and the continued silencing of the Black community.

<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism* (New York: NY: WW Norton, 1999), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Baruti Kopano, “Rap Music as an Extension of the Black Rhetorical Tradition: ‘Keepin’ It Real,’” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 4 (2002): 204.

<sup>8</sup> Unruly, “Geraldo Rivera Rips Kendrick Lamar's BET Award set,” (2015, June 30),

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3\\_hi8eWdbY&t=52s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3_hi8eWdbY&t=52s).

<sup>9</sup> Rhythm being the third, at least according to Shapiro's music theorist father. See Count Dooku, “Ben Shapiro Explains Why Rap Isn't Music,” (September 16, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zeiFF1SNCY>.

---

## Dilution

Even today, the best way for one to be considered a successful or important musician is to emulate the Western “ideal.”

One must, at least partially, “kill the Indian” if they wish to be successful in the West.

If one were to look at a list of popular and influential musicians who were born outside of a Western country within the last few decades, one would be hard pressed to find one who did not at least partially dilute their region’s traditional music with Western influences. Acclaimed Chinese cellist Yo-Yo Ma’s discography is mostly dedicated to Western compositions, and nearly all of his many awards were given for his Western works.

The worldwide phenomena of K-Pop—music from Korea, recognizable by its large focus on performance and accessible melodies—are, of course, massively influenced by American pop, from which they derive some of their musical conventions of catchiness and accessibility. The biggest Latin artists like Santana, Shakira, Camilla Cabello, J Balvin, Daddy Yankee, Ozuna, Maluma, and Ricky Martin all use rock, pop, or hip hop conventions in their music. It is a rare sight to see a non-Western artist become as massively popular and acclaimed as those named above without diluting their sound with Western music styles.

None of this is to say that using influences outside of one’s home is wrong, that these artists betrayed their art and culture by adopting Western or North American musical styles, or that all artists should simply stick to what their people have done in the past and never move beyond that cultural sphere. Instead, I am making the observation that success on the Western front is massively stacked in Western musical styles’ favour.

Before one says that this is natural and is only a matter of taste, one can think of how it is not the same case the other way around: Western

music does very well outside of the West. It would seem that there is an idea that Western music is the global norm, the only legitimate form of music towards which non-Westerners must strive if they wish to be considered. This sends a message that non-Western cultures’ music must be abandoned lest the musicians be left behind.

The abandonment of one’s music is the abandonment of one’s culture, one’s history, and is one step further in a homogenous Western music-sphere.

## Confinement

Finally, just as the “killed Indian” was left aside to do manual work because the conversion to civilized culture was deemed a failure, non-Western music, even when diluted by Western sounds, is cast aside as the “Other,” and separated from Western music.

This can be seen by the simple existence of the terms “Latin music” and “World music.” Entire continents are melded together into one single category, a category that simply means “non-Western.” In fact, iTunes’ genre appendix has almost as many subgenres in the “Rock” category (20) than there are subgenres in the “World” category (26). Apparently, one single genre from the West is almost as diverse as the entirety of music from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Pacific Islands—combined.

Another example of this confinement to the separated “Other” was this year’s controversy with the Video Music Awards (VMAs). They created a new category, the K-Pop Award, and placed acts like BTS, Blackpink, and Exo in this category—while simultaneously not nominating them for any major awards, such as Best Artist or Song of the Year, despite the incredibly massive success these artists have garnered. Even when music is created outside of the West, it is still defined by it: it is not Cuban salsa, Algerian raï, or Ainu yukar, but instead it is simply “not

Western.” As Quijano points out, the culture is confined to the “exotic,” a curiosity which Westerners can consume or from which they can find inspiration, but not a valid form of art, at least not to the level of Western culture.<sup>10</sup>

When other cultures are categorized separately from Western music, and then labeled as such, they are only partially recognized as a legitimate—but not as normative, which remains European and/or North American.<sup>11</sup> There are no “Western rock” categories in major Western award shows.

In this way there can be no questioning or critiquing the Western domination, as the Other’s music is “recognized”—but Western music remains the point of reference, the invisible baseline.

## Conclusion

The Other’s music is cast aside by the dominant, central, “superior” Western culture in order to keep these dominated cultures silent, disempowered, separate, or utterly effaced. This is done by dismissing the Other’s music through ethnocentric, pseudo-objective thought processes, diluting the “Otherness” of their music by making Western-style music the condition for success, and confining the Other’s musical expression to the inferior, devalued category of the exotic and non-Western.

There is, however, hope for change in this regard. The injustices I have described in this paper are no longer seen as the norm, and are controversial points of discussion: the comment section in the videos showing Rivera’s and Shapiro’s statements on hip hop is almost entirely dominated by people in fierce disagreement with them; terms like “world music” are continuously criticized as

exclusionary; and the VMAs K-Pop category news garnered heavy criticism. The emergence of the internet in particular is, in my opinion, a crucial tool in democratizing the production and consumption of various musics, allowing people to create, listen to, and, most importantly for me, *support* music from across the world within genres they would otherwise never even have heard of.

**iTunes’ genre appendix has almost as many subgenres in the “Rock” category (20) than there are subgenres in the “World” category (26).**

I think here of sites like Bandcamp or Soundcloud, where artists use tags to describe their music instead of having to submit to pre-made Eurocentric categories, and where every day the site’s staff aims to put a spotlight on something new, no matter how different it is from the established Western norm of the music industry. With these changes I believe that marginalized groups have a chance at being able to express their art on newly equal grounds.

<sup>10</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality, 170.

<sup>11</sup> Marie Battise, “Enabling the Autumn Seed: Toward a Decolonized Approach to Aboriginal Knowledge,

Language, and Education,” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 22, no. 1 (1998), 16-27.