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Feeling in Counterpoint: Complicit Spectatorship and the Filipino Performing Body

Broderick D. V. Chow

The video shows a baby-faced Filipino boy in his early teens sitting inside a moving bus outfitted with a professional radio setup.¹ We hear the voice of the announcer, speaking in lightly Tagalog-accented English: “Again without further ado, Darren Espanto on the Wish 107.5 bus.” Over what sounds like a karaoke version of Australian singer-songwriter Sia Furler’s international hit “Chandelier,” Espanto begins to sing, “Party girls don’t get hurt, can’t feel anything, when will I learn . . .,” his voice clear and controlled (fig. 1). The first verse and chorus adhere to Sia’s original vocal performance, including the slip into falsetto on the rising line (“from the chandeliee-er”) to a high F sharp (F#5). But by the second verse the interpretation is entirely Espanto’s. Instead of placing the note in falsetto register, each F#5 is belted, full-voice and resonant. He throws in a series of grace notes on the third line of the chorus, and ends it with a full-throated, descending riff. I feel the hairs raise on the back of my neck.

Espanto was 14 at the time of the recording in the Wish FM bus, a roving radio station in Quezon City that broadcasts live performances of popular Filipino recording

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¹Throughout this essay I use the terms *Filipino* and *Filipina* to refer to people; when referring to objects and ideas *Philippine* is used. With regards to referring to people of Philippine origin in the plural, I have chosen to use *Filipino*. The use of a demonym that appears to refer exclusively to male-identified subjects might appear problematic. In recent years, the use of the term *Filipinx* has become popular, especially within diasporic contexts. The “x” is intended to avoid the rigid gender binary of “o/a,” as in *Latinx*. However, as Philippine scholars have pointed out, indigenous Philippine languages did not assign genders to the vowels “o/a.” Thus I have chosen to follow other Philippine scholars writing in English, such as Neferti X. M. Tadiar and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, in using *Filipino*. See Rosario Cruz Lucero, “Ang Talinhaga ni Mariang Makiling: Isang Panimulang Makapilipinong Teoryang Feminista” (“The Trope of Mariang Makiling: Toward a Filipino Feminist Theory”), in *Ang Bayan Sa Labas Ng Maynila (The Nation Beyond Manila)* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007). I was pointed to this piece and its translation, as well as the discussion that has influenced my thinking in the use of demonyms, on the Tumblr page of “Mishka,” available at <http://sumbungero.tumblr.com/post/135711919973>.

Figure 1. Darren Espanto singing on the Wish FM bus, a roving radio station in Quezon City, Philippines. From the video “Darren Espanto Chandelier Sia LIVE Cover on Wish FM 107.5 Bus HD,” YouTube, 2015. (Source: Author’s screenshot.)

artists. The visible difference of Espanto, an Asian teenage boy, to Sia, a 42-year-old white Australian woman, produces an uncanny effect, compounded by the inappropriate lyrics (“Chandelier” is about alcohol and drug addiction; Espanto in 2018 is still not even old enough to drink in the Philippines). This racializing difference perhaps contributed to the global virality of this video. Only two weeks after its initial posting, the video had 610,000 views.² According to CNN Philippines, “his effortless belting of high notes has amazed celebrities, such as Nicki Minaj, Ashton Kutcher, and Jessie J, [and] garnered more than a hundred positive reaction videos.”³ As such, it is part of a genre of online performances that I call “viral Filipinos”—videos that depict Filipino singers performing American popular music.⁴ These videos often spawn “reaction videos,” which show one or more (non-Filipino) viewers watching and reacting to the video, which plays picture-in-picture in a lower corner of the screen (fig. 2). The camera is positioned to capture their reactions, which are over-the-top, effusive, and

² Wish 107.5, “Darren Espanto’s ‘Chandelier’ Performance on Wish 107.5 Goes Viral,” August 28, 2015, available at <https://www.wish1075.com/darren-espantos-chandelier-performance-on-wish-1075-goes-viral/>.

³ Alyana Cabral, “The Best and Worst Cover Songs from the Wish FM Bus,” CNN Philippines, June 14, 2017, available at <http://cnnphilippines.com/life/entertainment/music/2017/03/30/wish-bus-performances.html>.

⁴ Abigail de Kosnik has written about such videos as “Perfect Covers”; see her “Perfect Covers: Filipino Musical Mimicry and Transmedia Performance” (*Verge: Studies in Global Asia* 3, no. 1 [2017]: 137–61). However, this essay problematizes the idea that such covers are “perfect.” I therefore use the term *viral Filipinos* to describe them, and also to draw attention to the racial nature of their virality.

Figure 2. Josh Brooks (left) and Sam Brooks “react” to Espanto’s performance (inlaid image). Note the effusive nature of their surprised reactions. From the video “Darren Espanto-Chandelier [Sia] Live Cover Reaction!!” by HugKnucklesTV, YouTube, 2016. (Source: Author’s screenshot.)

peppered with attempts to verbalize the video’s effect on the spectator. “I literally feel it in my whole entire body,” says Yusof, of the Y & A Reacts channel.⁵ Although reaction videos exist for other viral phenomena, viral Filipinos are a hugely popular subject for reaction. Sam and Josh Brooks, the founders of the YouTube channel HugKnucklesTV, which has 123,000 subscribers, explain that “we kind of went really into Filipino culture, because we were so amazed by the differences and the similarities. . . . In the Philippines, I just feel like, we became part of the community.”⁶ The *New York Times* writer Sam Anderson argues that “[r]eaction videos are designed to capture, above all, surprise—that moment when the world breaks, when it violates or exceeds its basic duties and forces someone to undergo some kind of dramatic shift.”⁷ The dramatic shift that viral Filipino videos prompted for the Brooks was in their perception of a much larger world than their American bubble: “You live in this little world you built for yourself. And as soon as we started doing these reactions, it was like, we unlocked a new zone.”⁸ It is simultaneously heart-warming and discomfiting; what seems like a genuine desire for transcultural connection is underlined by a racializing and colonizing gaze.

⁵ Y & A Reacts, “Darren Espanto’s Chandelier Cover (Reaction),” YouTube, 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbGvo6CvMnc>.

⁶ HugKnucklesTV, “Darren Espanto-Chandelier [Sia] Live Cover Reaction!!” (2016), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB_3LDSxnQk.

⁷ Sam Anderson, “Watching People Watching People,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 25, 2011, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/magazine/reaction-videos.html?_r=1.

⁸ HugKnucklesTV, “Why We Do Filipino Reactions,” YouTube, 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzaFRUleDYI>.

Complicit Spectatorship

Videos like this are a guilty pleasure. I have watched “Chandelier” fifty or more times, and my YouTube feed is awash in other viral Filipinos videos—“undiscovered” performing bodies served up for a racializing and colonizing gaze that is also my own. Like me, Espanto is a Canadian of Filipino heritage. He was born in Calgary in 2001, and in 2014 traveled to Manila to compete on the first season of *The Voice Kids*, a Philippine junior version of the international television singing competition. Finishing second, he signed a record deal with MCA Music (Universal Music Philippines) and has since released two albums, *Darren* (2015) and *Be with Me* (2017). In an interview with the Singaporean website *The Native Entertainment*, Espanto said that he would like to stay in Canada if he could bring all his fans (“Darrenatics”) and misses “the snow and going camping.”⁹ I was not aware of any of this when I first came across his cover of “Chandelier” in a YouTube click-spiral of viral Filipinos content. I was born in Vancouver to a Filipina mother from Makati, Metro Manila, and a Chinese father. Like Darren, I am a musical performer, but my voice was forged in the rite of passage for Filipino musical theatre performers, Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil’s *Miss Saigon*, where I played Thuy in the 2005 Arts Club Theatre production.¹⁰ *Miss Saigon* was also the first piece of professional theatre I saw, at age 14 in Vancouver’s Queen Elizabeth Theatre, with a host of Filipino performers. I felt the same swell of pride at the new crop of talented Filipinos in the London West End revival of *Miss Saigon*, which I saw three times. In her chapter on *Miss Saigon* as a vehicle for the emergence of Filipinos as global talents, Filipina American academic Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns describes the “desire for identification” and the “pull of the politics of representation” that accompanied her viewing of the musical in spite of the stereotypes, misogynistic bar scenes, and “white liberal guilt” of the narrative.¹¹ In a similar way, my own “fraught nationalist association/identification” is responsible for the swell of feeling at Filipina actress Rachele Ann Go’s performance as Eliza Schuyler in the West End cast of *Hamilton* and motivates my fascinated viewing of viral Filipino videos.¹²

Yet, my spectatorship of such performances is tinged with feelings of shame and guilt at my partial and inadequate Philippine-ness; that is, my “imposter syndrome” in claiming to be represented by such performances. I have always identified as Chinese-Filipino-Canadian, but my mother herself comes from a Chinese-*mestizo* family. Our roots are in Manila, the hyper-urban capital, and worse yet, in Makati, a commercial district whose biggest attraction is probably the air-conditioning in the Greenbelt Shopping Mall. I now live in London, one of Prime Minister Theresa May’s “citizens of nowhere,” I speak no Tagalog (nor any other Philippine language), and I have not been back to the Philippines since 2011. My embodied experience of the country is strangely placeless—house, to car, to air-conditioned indoor space—which echoes Espanto’s experience of touring every province of the Philippines and only

⁹ Teejay Vergara, “Interview: Singing Sensation Darren Espanto on Singapore, Darrenatics, and the death of Christina Grimmie,” *Native Entertainment* (n.d.), available at <http://nativeentertainment.net/music/interview-singing-sensation-darren-espanto-on-singapore-darrenatics-and-the-death-of-christina-grimmie>.

¹⁰ See Broderick D. V. Chow, “Here Is a Story for Me: Representation and Visibility in *Miss Saigon* and *The Orphan of Zhao*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24, no. 4 (2014): 507–16.

¹¹ Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 110.

¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

seeing the hotel and venue before returning to Manila.¹³ How then does a Filipino performing Western pop music or musical theatre “represent” me, other than in the most superficially racializing terms? Does my spectatorship reproduce a neocolonial system of performance and labor?

My essay departs from this embodied assemblage of affect, history, and racial imposter syndrome to theorize a mode of spectatorship that I call “feeling in counterpoint.” I use the musical term *counterpoint*, referring to two or more temporally independent yet harmonically interdependent melodic voices in a piece of music, and its subsequent use in postcolonial theory by Fernando Ortiz, Edward Said, David Irving, and others to describe the multiple directions in which *affect*, broadly defined here as unruly and preconscious feeling, moves. Just as Espanto’s narrative as a second-generation diasporic subject returning to the homeland reveals a multidirectionality of Filipino migration sometimes obscured by nationalist or globalist discourses (neither overseas migrant nor *balikbayan*), his performance embodies the multidirectionality of affect, from performer to spectator and back.¹⁴ In order to push the F#5 into *birit* (or belted) register, Espanto must raise his soft palette and focus the sound into his nasal resonators, lowering the placement of his larynx to tighten his vocal folds, while maintaining tremendous breath support. This embodied act is rich with meaning; it is labor that exceeds the original text, calculated to move its audience. Listening to Espanto’s performance, we are simultaneously listening to the ghostly hauntings of Sia’s original. In other words, Darren is singing in counterpoint to another melodic voice, and hearing this counterpoint, this interdependent difference, implicates the spectator in the neocolonial and racializing formation that underlies it. Contrapuntal feeling is ambivalent. The economy of viral Filipinos and reaction videos, where a “moving” performance is met with a performance of “being moved,” demonstrates the spectator’s complicity in this racial formation. At the same time, the kinetic and corporeal language in the reactions (“I’m shook,” “I feel it in my soul”), as well as uncontrolled bodily movement and reaction (screams, gasps, tears), indexes the spectator’s attempt to capture or draw attention to what is in *excess* of the “original” Western text. I argue that attending to multiple lines of melody and affect empowers the listener to attend to multiple lines of history, coloniality, and migration—even, or especially, in performances that have often been analyzed via the trope of mimicry, or what Abigail de Kosnik calls “perfect covers.”¹⁵ This multidirectionality, furthermore, intervenes and suggests a different direction for Philippine theatre studies than the unidirectional movement of the postcolonial or decolonial cultural narrative. Feeling in counterpoint articulates a colonial and racialized formation at the same time that it reveals it to be moving and dynamic, marking the very thing that exceeds or evades capture by historical forces. As Erin Hurley suggests, feeling (affect) “exceeds us.”¹⁶ As autonomic responses of the body, affects are folded into social structures, but remain unruly and uncontrollable; in other words, there is always something affective that resists its incorporation into a larger historical interpretation or narrative.¹⁷

¹³ Vergara, “Interview.”

¹⁴ A *balikbayan* is a citizen of the Philippines who has lived abroad continuously for at least one year. It means “returning to home” or “repatriation.” See Republic of the Philippines Bureau of Immigration, “Balikbayan Privilege,” n.d., available at <http://www.immigration.gov.ph/faqs/visa-inquiry/balikbayan-privilege>.

¹⁵ De Kosnik, “Perfect Covers.”

¹⁶ Erin Hurley, *Theatre and Feeling* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 18.

¹⁷ Alexandra T. Vazquez’s performance studies intervention into Cuban musicology makes a similar point: her thick descriptions of listening to Cuban music—that is, listening for the details—makes it

In this essay I examine several examples of the Philippine performance of mimicry. Replaying what Burns points out is a “well-rehearsed” ground, I attend to the affective organization of the performances and how the representational labor of the performer slips, cracks, or exceeds the original text, opening the potential for contrapuntal feelings of neocolonial complicity (harmony) and resistance (dissonance).¹⁸ I argue that affect in excess of the text—in other words, the leftover of the act of mimicry—is the embodied experience of shifting identities and other possibilities, which is often subordinated to broader historical narratives. This embodied experience, I will argue, runs counter to the direction of decolonial praxis and theory, as it demonstrates the multidirectionality of coloniality and colonial influence and the co-implication of performer and spectator in such scenes.

Decolonial Directions in Philippine Theatre and Performance

This *Theatre Journal* special issue theme is not only an opportunity to consider the multidirectionality of affect, but to evaluate past and present directions in the field of Philippine theatre studies, especially in relation to postcolonial politics. During the 1970s, in light of then President Ferdinand Marcos’s neocolonial relationship with the United States, theatre studies in the Philippines began theorizing a “national” identity, which broadly aimed “to assert an anticolonial and anti-imperialist Philippine nationalism by creating narratives, myths, and ideologies of a pure, indigenous, and homogenous Philippine culture.”¹⁹ As Burns notes, the Marcoses “deployed cultural spectacle . . . to successfully sediment ‘compassionate’ rule,” refashioning national history to construct a progress narrative in which their mode of governance (authoritarianism, with Western liberal economic reforms) would be seen as “inevitable.”²⁰ In their national *tadhana* (destiny), the traditions of the past would give way to the urban, mobile, and global Filipino subject, while being enshrined as “heritage” in shiny, expensive buildings like Imelda Marcos’s Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). Philippine theatre scholarship moved in the other direction, affirming indigenous forms as living traditions.

However, this decolonial and nationalist vision also somewhat problematically erased the multiplicity and hybridity of Philippine theatre. Nicanor Tiongson, who became director of CCP after the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986, attempted to define “Philippine-ness” in drama outside of “polluting” European and US influences.²¹ Tiongson’s aim was the “Filipinization” of theatre, which he defined as a project “to forge a consciousness and a culture that would be identifiable as uniquely and proudly Filipino.”²² He celebrated native forms of theatre, such as the *komedya*, *sarsuwela*, and

impossible to sweepingly theorize Cuban music as a singular object that can “signify sweeping historical truths” or act as a “point of departure for more legible discourses about race and nation.” See Vazquez, *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁸ Burns, *Puro Arte*, 10.

¹⁹ Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, *Entablado: Theaters and Performances in the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2015), 1–2.

²⁰ Burns, *Puro Arte*, 82. Ferdinand Marcos’s 1974 Presidential Decree 442 (Labor Code) enshrined labor migration in the Philippines’ economic strategy, which was then institutionalized by Executive Order no. 797 in 1982 with the creation of the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA).

²¹ Nicanor G. Tiongson, “What Is Philippine Drama?” in Priscilena Patajo-Legasto, ed., *A Filipiniana Reader* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998).

²² Nicanor G. Tiongson, qtd. in Catherine Diamond, “Quest for the Elusive Self: The Role of Contemporary Philippine Theatre in the Formation of Cultural Identity,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 40, no. 1 (1996): 141–69, quote on 146.

bodabil, as well as folk traditions like the *panunuluyan* and *sinakulo*.²³ Filipinization was also a practice: during the 1990s and 2000s, the University of the Philippines (UP) and CCP staged festivals of *komedya* and *sarsuwela*, and artists from CCP, People's Educational Theatre Association (PETA), UP, and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) "went to the provinces and conducted workshops with the aim of introducing various national standards in art production."²⁴ However, as Anril Tiatco argues, Tiongson's essentialist vision obscured the hybridity of the very forms he celebrated (for example, *komedya* and *sarsuwela* are adaptations of Spanish forms, and *bodabil* is derived from US vaudeville). In contrast, Tiatco proposes that "the continuous theoretical discourse should not be based on the construction of a Philippine theatre identity or the reconstruction of a Philippine theatre identity, but rather the *affirmation* of Philippine theatre *identities*."²⁵ Tiatco's own research focuses on the theatre of the Greater Manila Area, and is unique in considering commercial theatre companies dedicated to staging Western plays and musicals as part of the wider Philippine theatre tradition (such companies include Repertory Philippines, Atlantis Productions, and New Voice Theatre Company). Tiatco's broadening of Philippine theatre studies might be considered as part of a contemporary constellation that moves between past and present to affirm the multiplicity of Philippine performance. In particular, the Performance Studies international (PSi) Fluid States event, "*Sa Tagilid na Yuta: Performance in Archipelagic Space*," led by Jazmin Llana, worked against any essentializing concept of Philippine theatre as a knowable object.²⁶ What unites the field of Philippine theatre studies, however, is the attempt at a postcolonial praxis to reckon with the country's complex colonial history and its present-day neocolonial international relations, whether through a revolutionary nationalism or its rejection.

The field of Philippine theatre and performance studies is influenced by other critical discourses in decolonial praxis and theory, such as the influential movement of *sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino psychology). *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (SP) is a program of research that investigates "everyday life and individual personality" in the Philippines, in contrast to colonial administrators' Orientalist attempts to know the Filipino.²⁷ By attempting to define knowledge outside of what Epifanio San Juan Jr. calls the "hegemonic episteme" of the United States, SP may be considered a part of broader international indigenization and decolonial movement in theory and practice, such as the work of Latin American scholars Walter D. Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Gloria Anzaldúa, which aims to decolonize not only power, but knowledge itself. Decoloniality, for Mignolo, means "de-linking" from colonial ways of knowing; it means "to

²³ *Komedya* (commedia) is a traditional epic form depicting conflicts between Christians and Muslims; *sarsuwela* is a form of musical theatre focused on social issues and everyday life; *bodabil* is variety performance, derived from the word *vaudeville*; *panunuluyan* is a Christmas performance that depicts the search for an inn by Mary and Joseph; and *sinakulo* is the Philippine passion play, taking place during Holy Week (Easter).

²⁴ Tiatco, *Entablado*, 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39 (emphasis in original).

²⁶ The event consisted of a series of journeys to performance gatherings (fiestas, weddings) in the three main islands of the Philippines, Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao between April and September 2015, followed by an international conference at De La Salle University in Manila during November 5–8, 2015. See "Fluid States: Performances of Unknowing, PSi #21/2015," 2015, available at <http://www.fluidstates.org/page.php?loc=69&id=71>.

²⁷ Epifanio San Juan Jr., "Toward a Decolonizing Indigenous Psychology in the Philippines: Introducing *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*," *Journal for Cultural Research* 10, no. 1 (2006): 47–67, esp. 52.

change the terms of the conversation, and above all, of the hegemonic ideas of what knowledge and understanding are and, consequently, what economy and politics, ethics and philosophy, technology and the organization of society are and should be.”²⁸ Like Tiongson’s vision for the theatre, SP is a quotidian attempt to both “Filipinize” Western ideas and “salvage what is autochthonous in the legacy of the past and in the contemporary situation.”²⁹ A related discourse is the Philippine tendency to speak of a “colonial mentality,” which psychologists E. J. R. David and Sumie Okazaki define as an automatic preference for anything related to a European-American way of life.³⁰ Within this context, mimicking or performing like Westerners is considered evidence of the historical process of coloniality, along with preferring foreign-made products and foods, Korean soap operas, Hollywood films, and (most controversially) moving overseas for work.

Broadly, these decolonial discourses, whether in theatre and performance, academic psychology, or everyday conversation, conceive of colonial influence as unidirectional. Colonial influence here flows in one direction, from the hegemon (United States) to the dominated. This is demonstrated by the way that decolonial praxis can resemble essentialism (as in Tiongson’s vision) or economic and cultural nationalism, such as the slogan “*tangkilikin ang sariling atin*” (patronize what is ours). Even though nationalism here does not have the same valence as current populisms in the United States and Europe, it can still entail a rejection of outside influence and a kind of uniform cultural identity. (San Juan himself critiques SP for “a kind of unwarranted populist idealism that discourages critical inquiry.”)³¹ Within this history, we see that a performance of mimicry like Espanto’s runs counter to the direction of decolonial discourse. At best, it does not fit in with the goal of decolonization, and at worst can appear to be an active collaborator against it. Yet, at the same time, I want to argue that such performances may enable us to consider coloniality and colonial influence in a multidirectional way.

Mimicry and Contrapuntal Feeling

There is a large body of scholarship on the idea of mimicry in Philippine performance. The concept has its roots in scholarship in the Philippines: Doreen Fernández notes how the hybrid or Filipinized form of *bodabil* played on the Filipino talent for imitation; Rey Ileto argues that mimicry in the Spanish colonial passion play (*pasyon*) provided “language for articulating [lowland Philippine society’s] own values, ideals, and even hopes of liberation.”³² Filipino scholars in the diaspora, as well as non-Filipino academics, have also taken up the concept in the North American/European academy (including two articles in the pages of *Theatre Journal*).³³ In this work, mimicry is treated as a mode of performance that is both stereotypically Filipino and the expression of

²⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 449–514, esp. 459.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁰ E. J. R. David and Sumie Okazaki, “Activation and Automaticity of Colonial Mentality,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 40, no. 4 (2010): 850–87.

³¹ San Juan Jr., “Toward a Decolonizing Indigenous Psychology,” 63.

³² Doreen G. Fernández, “Philippine Theatre in English,” *World Literature Today* 74, no. 2 (2000): 318–22, esp. 319; Rey Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, qtd. in Burns, *Puro Arte*, 9.

³³ J. Lorenzo Perillo, “‘If I was not in prison, I would not be famous’: Discipline, Choreography, and Mimicry in the Philippines,” *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 4 (2011): 607–21; William Peterson, “Amazing Show in Manila: ‘Fantasy-Production’ and Filipino Labor in a Transnational, Transcultural, Transgendered Theatre Enterprise,” *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 4 (2011): 587–605.

colonial and neocolonial history; in particular, the post-Marcos economic policy that has made the Philippines heavily dependent on remittances from Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs), which make up 13.5 percent of the Philippine gross domestic product. As William Peterson argues, imitative performance must be understood in relation to the circulation of Filipino labor in the global economy: relatively inexpensive, while "its 'added value' comes from the perception that Filipinos are more adaptable and more skilled at performing or mimicking their adopted culture than other Asians are."³⁴ The stereotype of Filipinos as skillful mimics, J. Lorenzo Perillo writes, simplifies "complicated historical processes" and (neo)colonial relations.³⁵ He uses a 2007 video of inmates at the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center dancing a rendition of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" to theorize what he calls the "Filipino mimicry stereotype," which "holds that Filipinos are both virtuoso mimics and usually of US culture, and that they are adept singers and dancers."³⁶ Abigail de Kosnik argues that "perfect covers" of Western pop contribute to a larger Philippine "brand." Drawing on Henry Jenkins III's concept of *transmedia*, which analyzes how elements of a larger narrative are dispersed across different media, she suggests that the videos transmediate an idea of "imitative skills" for a global marketplace, in which Filipino labor is a sought-after though devalued commodity.³⁷ Filipino mimicry has also been considered within the contexts of migrant musicians in Asia (Ng; Watkins); the mega-musical *Miss Saigon* (Burns; Chung); and *bakla* (third-sex) performers in both local pageants and the Korean-Filipino transnational spectacular *Amazing Show* (Cannell; Peterson).³⁸ Mimicry, therefore, is a stereotypical Philippine quality and popular mode of performance, but also the embodiment of a neocolonial geopolitical relation in which the Philippines is, according to Neferti Tadiar, the "kept mistress" of not only the United States, but also Singapore, Hong Kong, United Arab Emirates, and many other nations.³⁹

However, an embodied performance, like mimicry, is never *only* the expression of broader historical forces. In her book *Things Fall Away*, Filipina American social theorist Neferti X. M. Tadiar argues that dominant narratives of global capitalist democratization and anticolonial emancipation in the Philippines tend to devalue the everyday lived experiences of subaltern populations. She suggests that by paying attention to these material conditions as articulated in literature, we can find new forms of political agency.⁴⁰ In a similar way, I find that the pleasures, discomforts, and other embodied affects of performances of mimicry "fall away" from those ideas considered more "important," such as national identity or anticolonial practice and critique. When the living, breathing performance of mimicry is read as merely a symptom of a larger

³⁴ Peterson, "Amazing Show in Manila," 603.

³⁵ Perillo, "Discipline, Choreography, and Mimicry in the Philippines," 621.

³⁶ Ibid., 614.

³⁷ De Kosnik, "Perfect Covers."

³⁸ Stephanie Ng, "Performing the 'Filipino' at the Crossroads: Filipino Bands in Five-Star Hotels throughout Asia," *Modern Drama* 48, no. 2 (2005): 272–96; Lee Watkins, "Minstrelsy and Mimesis in the South China Sea: Filipino Migrant Musicians, Chinese Hosts, and the Disciplining of Relations in Hong Kong," *Asian Music* 40, no. 2 (2009): 72–99; Burns, *Puro Arte*; Tzu-I Chung, "The Transnational Vision of *Miss Saigon*: Performing the Orient in a Globalized World," *MELUS* 36, no. 4 (2011): 61–86; Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999); Peterson, "Amazing Show in Manila."

³⁹ Neferti X. M. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

historical process, the performing body itself is obscured, along with its theatrical, creative, artistic, and affective choices in moving its audience. Burns's concept of *puro arte* is useful in understanding the performing body beyond the act of mimicry: using the Tagalog term *puro arte*, meaning putting on a show or making a scene, she foregrounds mimicry as imitative labor. Reading historical performances, such as the "splendid" Filipino male dancers in 1920s California taxi dance halls (a dance hall in which women are paid to dance with male patrons), Burns recognizes the performer's agency and labor in performing artifice, inauthenticity, and extravagance, within a scene of colonial relations.⁴¹ Other scholars also, including Cannell, Roland Tolentino, and Martin Manalansan, have acknowledged the potential resistance in "self-fashioning" through mimicry.⁴² As Burns summarizes, these three scholars focus on queer practices of mimicry to "produce a generative theory . . . that goes beyond mere 'lack of inventiveness' and depleted cultural traits."⁴³

In this essay I aim to build on the analyses these scholars have inaugurated. By returning to the well-trodden ground of mimicry, I attempt to unpack the complicit pleasures of watching and listening and explore the unruliness of affect, which works on the spectator in spite of her resistance, criticality, or historical knowledge. What ways of knowing are circulated in such an affective economy? What counter-histories emerge in the details of vocal and embodied performance that are calculated to move an audience? Returning to the example of Espanto and the reaction videos his performance generated, I suggest that the emphatic show of feeling the reaction videos embody marks a multidirectionality of affect and influence, which we can understand through the concept of *counterpoint*.

Counterpoint in music is defined as two independent melodic lines that run simultaneously. Listing to counterpoint produces a feeling of multidirectional movement, despite mutual imbrication or even interdependence. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said deployed the musical term in his literary studies method of "contrapuntal reading," "a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts."⁴⁴ Just as his concept of *Orientalism* suggests that the West constructs knowledge of the East against which it can know itself, contrapuntal reading takes into account both imperialist and anti-imperialist processes. Many years earlier, in 1944, Ortiz used the term *counterpoint* in his book *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar* (*Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*). Here, counterpoint is a metaphor for his concept of *transculturation*, which refers to a mutual creation of culture in exchange.⁴⁵ Irving also draws on the musical metaphor of counterpoint and its actual articulation in music to theorize Manila as a space of *mestizaje* (material hybridity).⁴⁶ Through the use of a baroque musical term, Said, Ortiz, and Irving all conceptualize postcolonial spaces,

⁴¹ Burns, *Puro Arte*, 1.

⁴² Roland B. Tolentino, "Transvestites and Transgressions: Panggagaya in Philippine Gay Cinema," *Journal of Homosexuality* 39, nos. 3–4 (2000): 325–37; Martin Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴³ Burns, *Puro Arte*, 13.

⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), 51.

⁴⁵ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940 [1995]).

⁴⁶ David R. M. Irving, *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

texts, and practices as mutually (but not symmetrically) imbricated. Using the term in combination with the idea of affect, I am arguing for a more textured understanding of performances in postcolonial space, where the performer's production of affect negotiates its own agency within deterministic historical, economic, and political forces. At the same time, the spectator's reception is necessarily conflicted, wavering between pure enjoyment and critical revulsion (hence my development of this idea through my own guilty pleasures).

What follows are three "scenes" of colonial mimicry: a minor character in José Rizal's nineteenth-century novel *Noli Me Tángere* dances to a different beat; a viral video taken in a Mindanao shopping mall shows a singer passing time at a karaoke display; and a Filipina popstar plays the wife of an American founding father in London's West End. I use a "thick-descriptive" voice to provide an account of a spectator (or reader), accounting for my own affective response as well as the context of these performances. This method thus entails a somewhat solipsistic view, because my larger point is to explore the embodied, co-implicated experience of performer and spectator on a global scale, across borders and time. Furthermore, "feeling in counterpoint" is a way of seeing and listening that felt necessary to me in order to comprehend my own positionality in relation to Philippine performance and specifically mimicry. I am a Filipino person whose Philippine identity runs in counterpoint with other Philippine identities; yet, we are bound together by our colonial histories in a complex polyphonic arrangement. The performances I describe below feel meaningful because the experience of viewing them embodies this complexity, even as they may seem minor, quotidian, or even unsuccessful.

Another Rhythm, Another Melody: Doña Consolación

The character of Doña Consolación in Rizal's novel is an embodiment of the intersection of mimicry, comic grotesquery, and complicity with colonial regimes. Written in Spanish and first published in Germany in 1887, the *Noli* is regarded as an inspirational document for the first Philippine revolution, but it is also a Dickensian comedy, with an enormous cast of characters populating the town of San Diego, Laguna province. Consolación is a minor character, with two memorable appearances in the novel. In the first, she is a grotesque caricature whose comic antics serve as a cautionary tale against performing for the colonial gaze. Consolación is a former *labandera* (laundry woman), "an old Filipina much painted and rouged," now married to the Alférez, the captain of the Spanish Civil Guard (a colonial administrator).⁴⁷ Furthermore, she pretends to be Spanish in her dress and performance of self in everyday life. While she is barely able to speak or understand Spanish, she pretends not to understand Tagalog. Consolación mimics the dress of upper-class Spanish women, but the performance is poor: she wears a "flannel blouse" rather than silk, smokes a cigar, and harasses young (Spanish) women whom she presumably envies: "she shouted out ribald nicknames for them as they passed by, frightened, embarrassed, with downcast eyes, and scarcely breathing."⁴⁸ But while all others see through her, her own delusion of colonial mentality is complete. "Doña Consolación had a great asset," Rizal writes; "to all appearances she had never looked in a mirror."⁴⁹ Although Consolación's performance

⁴⁷ José Rizal, *Noli Me Tángere*, trans. León Ma. Guerrero (Manila: Guerrero Publishing, 1887 [1995]), 63.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

of self is directed outward to the Spanish ruling class, she is not legible as Spanish by the colonial gaze. Sixty-five years before the publication of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Rizal's novel illustrates the internalization of colonial identity and its folly. In his model, colonial influence is directed inward to the dominated self and performed back, but illegibly, crassly, and cheaply, thus opening a gap between the representation and the performing body, which in Rizal's comic novel reads as satire. The gap between representation and body is also the space of Consolación's *racialization*, for the gap must be perceived in order for mimicry to be perceived as different or exceptional; mimicry itself is a racialized form of performance.

It would be easy to dismiss Consolación as a victim of Spanish colonial mentality, whose inauthentic and ridiculous performance of identity has no place in a liberated nation. She is a symptom of the "social cancer" that Rizal (a trained ophthalmologist) diagnoses in the novel, whose title ("touch me not") refers to a painful, ocular form of the disease. However, Consolación's second scene provides a very different perspective and opens a way to read contrapuntally, through Rizal's deployment of tropes of music and dance/movement. In this chapter (39), Consolación orders her servant, Sisa, to sing for her. Sisa responds by singing a *kundiman*, a melancholy, plaintive form of native Tagalog love poetry. Listening to the music, Consolación finds herself overwhelmed by grief: "The voice, the meaning of the words, the melody itself, were making an impression on her: perhaps that dry and withered heart felt the need of rain."⁵⁰ She suddenly orders Sisa, in "perfect Tagalog," to stop singing. The soldier in Consolación's employ suddenly catches on and exclaims, "So she knows Tagalog after all!"⁵¹ Humiliated, Consolación begins to dance, what Tadiar calls an "exorcist ritual":⁵² "Then Doña Consolación started jumping up and down, shaking herself, and urging Sisa to imitate her. From far away came the strains of a grave and solemn march played by one of the brass bands in the religious procession, but Doña Consolación was cavorting about in a frenzy, following another rhythm, another melody, within herself."⁵³

When Sisa laughs at her mistress's humiliation, Consolación begins whipping her feet: "'Are you going to dance or not, you native bitch?' Doña Consolación screamed as the whip whistled."⁵⁴ Tadiar suggests that Consolación's second appearance in *Noli* is "a figuration of the mode of experience that is otherwise excised from the representation of the proper historical subject of nationalism, even as it is a motivating force of nationalism's construction."⁵⁵ She cites Iletto's reading of this passage through the affects of *awa* (mercy or pity) and *damay* (grief), which "significantly animated and shaped Philippine nationalism," although they were perceived as backwards and regressive by the nationalist movement.⁵⁶ But I argue that Consolación counterbalances the *awa* and *damay* that animates her with her own animating force. She is moved by Sisa's performance, but also moved from a force "within herself," and finally moves Sisa by force. Throughout this scene a brass band plays outside. Three strains of music are moving here, in different directions: the approved melody (the military brass band, playing in a public, although colonized, space); the decolonial and resurgent melody

⁵⁰ Ibid., 282.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 7.

⁵³ Rizal, *Noli Me Tángere*, 283.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

(Sisa's *kundiman*); and a line of music within Consolación herself, a wild and unruly dance that recalls Nora's tarantella and so must also remind us of the agential awakening of Ibsen's proto-feminist heroine. Consolación's melody is disturbing, because its counterpoint is dissonant; it awakens a third mode of feeling amid the status quo arrangement of the colonial present and the indigenous past.

Listening to the chaotic organization of affect in this scene, we become aware of Consolación as a more complex figure than the comic grotesque or cruel enabler of the Spanish regime. Reading in counterpoint also enables us to *feel* in counterpoint. We are not supposed to like Consolación, and yet reading the chapter, I am thrilled at the force with which her own personal melody and rhythm moves the other characters in her orbit, as well as the reader. After her inexcusable torture of Sisa, her husband, the Alferez, returns. He tells his servants to dress Sisa's wounds and rages at Consolación. But she fights back, whipping her husband and locking herself in her room, before the Alferez eventually lures her out and beats her. The scene is intended as punishment for her abuse of a native woman of Consolación's former social and racial class, but what I feel is her defiance. Consolación cannot be kind to Sisa because of her own shame at pretending to be what she is not, but also because this new self is also the truth. Her dancing, her whipping, and her rage are the wild, unruly, and strangely seductive affects that result.⁵⁷

The theatrical signifiers that Rizal uses to emphasize the distinction between representation and performing body, which account for the tragi-comedy of the character, in this light begin to seem knowing and even resistant. Her performance relies too heavily on theatrical tools, like makeup, costume, and props (the cigar), which are not sufficient to distract from her incomplete interpellation into elite Spanish society. Like Judith Butler's reading of drag, which disrupts the false binary nature of gender, the slips, cracks, and excesses of Consolación's performance of "Doña" Consolación renders the dominant and supposedly transparent idea of Spanish identity into crude signifiers. Rizal's scene of mimicry thus prefigures Homi Bhabha's writing on mimicry in *The Location of Culture*: "in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. . . . Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers."⁵⁸ His articulation of the double structure of mimicry suggests that the mode of domination that it evidences is also threatened by the excess or slippage of the performance. I argue that what threatens the performance of mimicry in this case is not the return of an Indigenous, authentic past, but an in-between affect produced by colonial mentality, which, like any psychological structure, is necessarily incomplete. The affect that floods the scene is difficult to describe; it is not only pity and grief (*awa* and *damay*), but also shame, anger, humiliation, and, strangely, pleasure. For me, it is the ambivalent affect that accompanies those subjects (yes, *me*) who code switch, perform their proximity to whiteness in a set of knowing gestures, try to make flannel look like silk, and sometimes smoke cigars and pick fights in the streets.

⁵⁷ I am reminded of Roxane Gay's essay "Not Here to Make Friends," in which she analyzes female protagonists who are putatively "unlikeable," but live fully. See Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 83–95.

⁵⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 85.

Moving and Being Moved: Animatedness and Viral Filipinos

The unruly, multidirectional nature of affect in chapter 39 of the *Noli*, which manifests itself in an excess of movement (dance), may be usefully analyzed through Sianne Ngai's theorization of the racialized affect of animatedness. In her book *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai defines *animatedness* as "the most basic or minimal of all affective conditions: that of being, in one way or another, 'moved.'"⁵⁹ However, it is also an affect that adheres to racialized subjects, who are marked as excessively emotional and controlled or moved by their own emotions.⁶⁰ In Ngai's work, it is "the cultural representation of the African-American that most visibly harnesses the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity, and zeal to a disturbing racial epistemology, and makes these variants of 'animatedness' function as bodily (hence self-evident) signs of the raced subject's naturalness or authenticity."⁶¹ Analyzing a wide range of texts, including Harriet Beecher Stowe's depiction of Uncle Tom at prayer and the Fox Television stop-motion animated series *The PJs*, she suggests that "the connection between animation and affectivity is surprisingly fostered through acts resembling the practice of puppeteering, involving either the body's ventriloquism or a physical manipulation of its parts."⁶² Animatedness therefore has a double sense: on the one hand it means "lively," and on the other suggests a body moved by external forces, outside his/her own volition.

In contrast to the exaggerated animatedness of most ethnic subjects in the United States, the racial stereotyping of Asians has typically gone the other way: Asians are marked as inscrutable, silent, and inanimate.⁶³ Filipinos, however, prove a notable exception. Perillo's Filipino mimicry stereotype relies upon both dimensions of animatedness: first, viewing Filipino/as as overly lively; and second, pliant and able to be animated. Filipino performing bodies are perceived as naturally "exceptional" or "splendid" singers and dancers (for instance, Burns's analysis of the Philippines as a supposedly natural talent pool for the recruitment of performers in productions of *Miss Saigon*). However, because these talents appear through the mimicry of Western texts, they are also perceived as receptive to external control. This racializing discourse was already present in US President William McKinley's declaration of the "benevolent assimilation" of American colonization.⁶⁴ After the Spanish-American War, McKinley declared that "there was nothing left for us to do but to take [the islands] . . . and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could do by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed and went to sleep and slept soundly."⁶⁵ In McKinley's declaration, Filipinos are like pliant clay, moldable through the civilizing animus of the US empire: standardized education, universal adoption of English, bicameral political system, and popular culture. Filipino leaders and regimes have often been referred to as American "puppets"—the most familiar of animated objects.

⁵⁹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 91.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 98–99.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁴ The name of the proclamation by President William McKinley made on December 21, 1898.

⁶⁵ Cited in Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 44.

In my analysis of Rizal's Doña Consolación, I demonstrated that feeling in counterpoint can identify a motivating force that is counter to either the line of colonial influence or the resistant, indigenous politics of decoloniality. I now want to apply this spectatorial position to the performance of Western music in viral Filipino videos. These are often defined by the idea of the "undiscovered" singer, a talent in an unusual place. As Doreen St. Felix points out, internet virality often profits on the unremunerated performance labor of racialized subjects.⁶⁶ Within the context of the tropical archipelago, the trope of discovery takes on an extra colonial dimension. Take, for example, Arjohn Gilbert, a teenage Aeta boy who was filmed singing Justin Bieber and Bruno Mars in a small village in Pampanga.⁶⁷ The video, most likely filmed and uploaded by a group of Filipino tourists from one of the big cities visiting the provinces, quickly went viral as "Filipino street kid singing," a trope of which there are thousands of examples on YouTube.⁶⁸ Gilbert's narrative embodies the intersection of a contemporary digital-cultural economy, in which someone like Bieber can be discovered via homemade videos, and a much older colonial, racial, and gendered system. Gilbert is performing for an assumed global audience, even as his actual live audience is other Filipinos. In this way, he appears animated by forces of globalization, just as his vocal mimicry of Bieber's sound is an embodiment of animatedness.

The consequences of historical forces animating the Filipino performing body are shown clearly in the story of singer Jake Zyrus, a 26-year-old female-to-male transgender man, who was also discovered via YouTube. He began performing under the name Charice with a female gender identity. Zyrus's videos were posted by an account called FalseVoice and amassed over 15 million views. At age 15, Charice was invited to the United States to perform on Ellen DeGeneres's talk show after she had viewed the videos online, and subsequently by Oprah Winfrey, who introduced Charice to the producer David Foster. As Charice, Zyrus was billed as the "little girl with the big voice" and dressed like a doll, cementing a racialized disjuncture between the soulful voice and tiny Asian body. After the release of his first album, Charice returned to the Philippines and began his gender transition in 2017. Zyrus continues to record and perform and released his new single, "DNM," an uptempo Tagalog R&B number, in May 2019.⁶⁹ He says of Charice, "I feel like she's a different person. I don't want to totally erase her from my life. When I watch my old videos, I just see her as a little sister."⁷⁰ The early performances of Zyrus as Charice, dressed in girlish party dresses, are fascinating for the way that the contralto voice appears to be someone else's and not the little girl's onstage. But in fact it was the image of the little girl that came from elsewhere, imposed by the US and Philippine music industries and a neocolonial apparatus in which the Philippines is the feminized Other to the United States. With the

⁶⁶ Doreen St. Felix, "Black Teens Are Breaking the Internet and Seeing None of the Profits," *Fader*, Dec.-Jan. 2017, available at <http://www.thefader.com/2015/12/03/on-fleek-peaches-monroe-meechie-viral-vines>.

⁶⁷ The Aeta people are an Indigenous, Australo-Melanesian ethnic group who mainly live in the Central Luzon area of the Philippines.

⁶⁸ In fact, Gilbert was actually discovered in 2009, two years before the filming of this video; see Carmela G. Lapeña, "Aeta Street Kid Singing Bieber Is a Hit on YouTube," *GMA News Online*, August 3, 2011, available at <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/228255/showbiz/aeta-street-kid-singing-bieber-is-a-hit-on-youtube>.

⁶⁹ Jake Viswanath, "Jake Zyrus Is Living His True Self," *Paper*, July 6, 2017, available at <http://www.papermag.com/jake-zyrus-2453953431.html>.

⁷⁰ Alan Policarpio, "Charice's Journey to Becoming Transman Jake Zyrus," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 3, 2017, available at <http://entertainment.inquirer.net/232706/charices-journey-becoming-transman-jake-zyrus>.

knowledge of Zyrus's story, Charice's performances, like Arjohn's, also appear as a body animated by historical, economic, social, and political forces not of its own making.

However, as I have been suggesting, affect moves in multiple directions, flowing from performer to spectator and back again in an economy that is hardly reciprocal, but nonetheless suggests agency for the performer—not an animated body, but a body animating the spectator. In 2012, a YouTuber uploaded a video simply called “And I am telling you (Random Girl) (SM Megamall).” The video shows a Filipina, dressed casually and carrying a red backpack, singing the act 1 closer of the musical *Dreamgirls* at a karaoke tester display at SM, or ShoeMart, a department store similar to Walmart (fig. 3).⁷¹ Another video of “Random Girl” singing Whitney Houston's version of “I Will Always Love You” appeared soon after, and the videos went viral.⁷² Shortly afterward, like Zyrus, she was invited on the talk show *Ellen*, where she was finally identified as Zendee Rose Tenerefe from General Santos City, Mindanao.⁷³ In the interview, Tenerefe positions herself outside of the idea of the “random” discovery, telling DeGeneres that she went to SM out of boredom, “to get attention from everyone.” “That's the only place you could go!” adds DeGeneres, the white US talk show host. DeGeneres focuses on the discovery of this natural talent in an unlikely place, while Tenerefe asserts a pleasure in performance and attention seeking.

“And I am telling you (Random Girl)” abruptly starts with Tenerefe already in performance. Shot from a distance, we are initially unable to match the amplified voice with the small, unassuming girl looking at the karaoke machine. There is a disjuncture between the voice and the racialized body, as if the voice is separate from the body, “animating” it—an effect shared by Espanto, Gilbert, and Zyrus. Yet, the performer's agency reasserts itself in the pleasure that Tenerefe takes in performing and her knowing ability to move an audience—that is, the affect that is in excess of the original text. Her performance of “I Will Always Love You” is a spectacular example. The video begins with Tenerefe acknowledging her small audience in the shopping mall, before turning back to the karaoke machine. She begins what de Kosnik would call a “perfect cover” of Houston's most famous song. However, at a little over three minutes in, she departs from Houston's original performance, going beyond mimicry and into her own interpretation. “But above all this, I wish you lo-ove,” she sings, stretching the word into a grace note that she repeats nine times. Each subsequent grace note becomes increasingly unnecessary, highlighted further by the slight smile on Tenerefe's face. “I wish you lo-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-ove.” Listen to me, each semi-tone flip says, her vocal cords agile as gymnasts. “Yeah,” someone in the crowd affirms. As the familiar climactic drum kicks in (“And I-I-I . . .”), she slips free of the original melody, transforming Houston's original two-note phrase (B-C-B) into a melisma that reaches up to a belted Eb5. The three-note riff (B-C-B-Eb-C-B) transforms the quotidian and blandly Westernized space of SM into a stage for Tenerefe's enjoyment of her own affective capacities and the audience's enjoyment of their capacity to be affected.

⁷¹ “And I am telling you (Random Girl) (SM Megamall),” YouTube, July 28, 2012, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ne9lqMbOSv8>.

⁷² “Random Girl in the Mall Blows Everyone Away . . .,” YouTube, September 16, 2012, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VBbErzAYQw>.

⁷³ “Zendee Rose Tenerefe, The Ellen DeGeneres Show,” YouTube, October 29, 2012, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxW9ozJRGYM>.

Figure 3. Zendee Rose Tenerefe sings “I Will Always Love You” at SM Megamall in Mindanao. When the video was originally posted, Tenerefe was known as “Random Girl.” From the video “Random Girl in the Mall Blows Everyone Away . . .,” YouTube, September 16, 2012. (Source: Author’s screenshot.)

The Tagalog words *birít* (belting) and *kulot* (melisma or riffs) describe Tenerefe’s singing. When a singer uses *kulot*, she modifies the melody, remaining within the harmonic structure, but marking her artistic gesture through its difference from the original. Hence in popular music, riffs are typically sung on the second or third chorus, in order to establish the lead line first and often over backup singers who sing the primary melody. *Kulot* takes on meaning because the listener has knowledge of the original melody; thus it is a kind of counterpoint in which the other voice is a ghostly absence, existing in memory, but threatened by the presence of the live voice. Of course, the ghostly counterpoint in this scene is Houston, who died in February 2012, around five months before Tenerefe’s cover was uploaded. Her cover, from the soundtrack to the movie *The Bodyguard*, is itself ghosted by the voice of white country-singer Dolly Parton, who composed the song in 1973. Houston, whose voice was trained in the African American tradition of gospel, struggled throughout her career with a mainly white musical industry trying to commodify and discipline her voice.⁷⁴ Her cover of “I Will Always Love You,” a song written by a white country-singer, might be read as a reassertion of vocal blackness via what Richard Rischar analyzes as her “copious ornamentation” and “gospel declaration.”⁷⁵ In other words, its power is felt in coun-

⁷⁴ See Jaap Kooijman, “The True Voice of Whitney Houston: Commodification, Authenticity, and African American Stardom,” *Celebrity Studies* 5, no. 3 (2014): 305–20, esp. 309, where the author summarizes a number of criticisms of Whitney “selling out” and adopting a “white” sound.

⁷⁵ Richard Rischar, “A Vision of Love: An Etiquette of Vocal Ornamentation in African-American Popular Ballads of the Early 1990s,” *American Music* 22, no. 3 (2004): 407–43, quote on 420.

terpoint with another line of anti-blackness in America and its music industry. The racial politics of Tenerefe's cover are complicated by this contrapuntal narrative. Part of the fascination for viewers of some viral Filipino videos is that the singer "sounds black"; and certainly there is an unmistakable similarity in timbre between Houston and Tenerefe. While there is not room in this essay to explore the politics of taste for black American genre and aesthetics in the Philippines, we might simply note that what can be read as appropriation in Tenerefe's performance is accompanied by its own disempowering racializing discourse of animatedness, which makes it seem like she does not own her voice, creative labor, or inventiveness.

Feeling in counterpoint, Tenerefe's voice affectively ruptures the globalizing "non-place" of the shopping mall, transforming a quotidian act of karaoke into an instance of excessive, unnecessary pleasure. Her pastime—a way to enliven the deeply embodied boredom of the global shopping mall—thus resonates with the spectator's own experience of being in malls, perhaps even hearing "that song" in the mall. Back-phrasing, stretching out the line, adding in even more "copious ornamentation," Tenerefe's voice pulls against and entangles the global forces embodied by the shopping mall and the classic American song she has chosen. Moving against and around the highlighted lyrics of the karaoke machine moving from left to right, Tenerefe's voice grounds itself in the body.

Open Vowels: Rachele Ann Go in *Hamilton*

I became aware of Filipina actress and singer Rachele Ann Go when she appeared as Gigi, a seasoned bar-girl, in the London revival of *Miss Saigon*. Go was both a popstar in the Philippines and a veteran of the Manila commercial theatre, where she played Ariel in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (Atlantis Productions) and Jane Porter in *Tarzan* (Meralco Theater, Pasig City). I was impressed by Go's performance of "The Movie in My Mind," a difficult song whose strophic form (without refrain or chorus) requires the performer to hit a series of increasingly higher, sustained notes before belting a final, climatic high E5 above middle C. Following *Miss Saigon*, Go was cast as Fantine in the long-running West End production of *Les Misérables*. Here, she played a white character—a French seamstress—in a long blond wig and flowing dress. Her voice suited the lyrical phrases of the iconic "I Dreamed a Dream," and her casting recalled the earlier performance of Lea Salonga in the role.

In 2017, Go was cast as Eliza Schuyler in the West End premier of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. The leading role is the biggest opportunity for Go as an actress on the West End stage thus far, but her casting is accompanied by its own racial baggage. Eliza, the historical figure, is a white woman, but *Hamilton*'s principle cast is predominantly people of color, reflecting how "America looks now" according to Miranda.⁷⁶ However, Eliza, the wife of Alexander Hamilton, has often been a vehicle for an Asian actress, reproducing a schema in which Asians are "feminized" in their Otherness.⁷⁷ Critical reception of Go's performance, while broadly positive, at times reflected this racial structure: Matt Trueman describes her as "sweetly nondescript, throwing away

⁷⁶Erik Piepenburg, "Why 'Hamilton' Has Heat," *New York Times*, June 12, 2016, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/08/06/theater/20150806-hamilton-broadway.html>.

⁷⁷Six actors who have played Eliza are of Asian descent: Philippa Soo, Arianna Afsar, Shoba Narayan, Julia Harriman, and Rachele Ann Go, and Go's West End understudy, Marsha Songcome.

her songs by treating them as showpieces," while Quentin Letts conjures the specter of animatedness by comparing her to a "Sindy doll."⁷⁸

Before seeing the musical, I found myself strangely protective of Go, a fellow Chinese-Filipino in London. Interviewed on BBC Radio 2 by presenter Anneka Rice, I cringed as she was talked over by her fellow Schuyler sisters Rachel John (Angelica) and Christine Allado (Peggy). "Why are so many Filipinos great performers?" Rice asks Go and Allado (who is also from the Philippines). "I don't know," says Go, in her small, girlish voice, in Tagalog-accented English. Cutting in, in her perfect American accent, Allado explains that "my singing teacher at the Royal Academy of Music says it's because of our language, which has a lot of open vowels."⁷⁹ I carried my racial identification with Go's specific kind of Otherness, the same "fraught nationalist association/identification" with which I opened this essay, into my viewing of *Hamilton*. Watching Go as Eliza, I felt an ambivalent discomfort that I can analyze after the fact through a contrapuntal lens.

Go first appears in the opening ensemble number "Alexander Hamilton," where she is the only woman to sing solo. In a silk, pastel-colored dress, she indeed strikes me as "doll-like," two heads shorter than Jamael Westman, the actor playing her eventual husband. Miranda's representation of women in *Hamilton* has been critiqued by Jill Dolan, among others, and Go's polished image in the role seems to confirm the musical's representation of women in "the most conventional and stereotypical roles."⁸⁰ However, when she opens her mouth to sing, I feel something kick against the text. Her first line is a riot of complex rhythm and syncopation: "when he was **ten** his father **split** / full of **it** / **debt rid**-den / two—years—lat-er see Alex and his mo-ther **bed rid**-den / Half—**dead** / sittin-in-their-own **sick** / the **scent thick**."⁸¹ The line is sung, but it is barely a melody, only rising a semi-tone. It does not come naturally to Go; I hear a thickness of tongue struggle to contain and discipline the line of melody with consonants. She is overdoing it, each "t" spilling past the semi-quaver syllable, threatening to derail the flow. I hear Go's voice as an agent in and of itself, acting with and against her task of performing Miranda's words. Her vowels want to assert themselves, to open up, their unruly affect struggling against the disciplinary mode of the consonants.

Hamilton was written to be representative of America, but its vocality is grounded in Miranda's positionality: a Puerto Rican American growing up in the Inwood neighborhood of New York City. The text's rhythmic sung-rap requires the singer to place his or her vocalization forward, into the nasal resonators, modify open vowels into the diphthongs of the Northeast and bite down on the hard consonants of the English-language wordplay. Go's vocality is one of lung-collapsing sustained notes and agile

⁷⁸ Matt Trueman, "West End Review: *Hamilton*," *Variety*, December 21, 2017, available at <https://variety.com/2017/legit/reviews/hamilton-review-london-west-end-1202647480/>; Quentin Letts, "It's Good But Don't Believe All That Hype . . . *Hamilton* Is No Revolution," *Daily Mail*, December 27, 2017, available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-5204009/QUENTIN-LETTS-gives-verdict-Hamilton-West-End-hit.html>.

⁷⁹ Christine Allado, Rachele Ann Go, and Rachel John, interview by Anneka Rice, *The Radio 2 Arts Show with Anneka Rice*, BBC Radio 2, April 5, 2018.

⁸⁰ Jill Dolan, "Hamilton," *Feminist Spectator*, February 24, 2016, available at <http://feministspectator.princeton.edu/2016/02/24/hamilton/>.

⁸¹ Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Alexander Hamilton," in *Hamilton: The Revolution*, ed. Jeremy McCarter (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 23–26. Emphasis, in boldface, has been added to convey the syncopation of the text.

runs, a singing voice grounded in the embodied experience of speaking Tagalog, a language with eight fewer consonant sounds than English and that at times appears to be all vowels. Witnessing her visible labor to discipline her voice into this American text, I feel in contrapuntal movement my own struggle to pronounce Tagalog words—the glottal stops that give meaning to the flow of sound in words like *oo* (“yes”), *paano* (“how”), *ng* (“of”), *kalayaan* (“freedom”). If consonants are what give words significance, the glottal stop is a form of meaning that takes place further back from the tip of the tongue, the teeth, and the lips and therefore closer to the heart.

The open vowels and glottal stops are things I must labor to perform, because my positionality in the flows of migration meant that I among my cousins was the only one born in Canada, which meant I could run home from school one day and demand to speak only English from then on. It is tied up in the burning shame of inauthenticity when I meet another Filipino and hear the question, “Do you speak Tagalog?” No, I explain, my Canadian accent tied around my tongue, *my mother didn’t speak it at home and she went to American school in Manila and I’m half Chinese*. I hear all this, or rather feel it, and this affective experience resists its incorporation into a narrative by which Go’s success on Broadway and in the West End becomes representative of a larger historical narrative of neocolonial migrant labor. If on the one hand Go’s “mimicry,” appearing in another Western musical-theatre role, represents a broader process of Filipino assimilation to global (American) culture and economy, her recalcitrant open vowels must be heard as specific stumbles or trips in assimilation as an embodied process. This affect then prompts a contrapuntal feeling of my own, grounded in my already assimilated, diasporic Philippine-ness. What I am attempting to describe through this thick-descriptive mode is an economy of feeling, like the viral Filipino video that prompts a corresponding reaction video. In this case, as in the previous two examples, I suggest that the economy of feeling captures a contrapuntal experience of Philippine identity that does not necessarily fit into accepted narratives of nation, diaspora, migration, and assimilation.

Conclusion

The aims of this essay were twofold: first, to consider past and present directions in Philippine theatre studies; and second, to develop a multidirectional mode of analysis I have called “feeling in counterpoint.” The three scenes of colonial mimicry I have discussed all embody a kind of slippage or excess that enables us to read, or hear, them contrapuntally. I have suggested that these performances resist their interpellation into the broad direction of Philippine theatre studies, whose theorization in the twentieth century tended to espouse an anticolonial or decolonial liberationist politics. Furthermore, they also resist being seen only as symptoms of a larger neocolonial history and political economic system. Contrapuntal analysis necessarily requires me to implicate myself in the reading of these pieces, which I have tried to do by grounding this essay in my embodied experiences of shame, guilty pleasure, and inauthenticity or imposter syndrome. The danger then is that my readings are limited to my own positionality alone. However, what I want to model is a method of reading that does not subordinate the embodied performance to its historical context, but sits with the performance, considering it as an entanglement of multidirectional forces of influence. Feeling in counterpoint is a reminder that, as Tadiar suggests, the embodied experience of coloniality may be contradictory or complicit; it may reproduce dominant power

structures through gestures and practices. But it may also point toward other historical possibilities for the subject.⁸²

By attending to affects in these scenes of colonial mimicry, I want to add texture to the narratives and directions of Philippine theatre studies, first by emphasizing the performing body's ability as an affect-producer, and second by noting that while in many situations the affective labor of the Filipino performing body is exploited for the consumption of the rest of the world, it is not only ever exploited. Indeed, it can exceed the structural conditions of mimicry by indexing pleasure, creativity, inventiveness, and bodily skill and autonomy. This multiple and "moving" scene of globalized identities complicates the way in which we understand ideas of migration, diaspora, and transnationalism, and marks a shift from the Filipino performing body—a pliant object animated by the forces of history—to the Filipino performer, an agent of its process.

⁸² Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*.