

Mary Talusan's *Instruments of Empire: Filipino Musicians, Black Soldiers, and Military Band Music during US Colonization of the Philippines*

Arwin Q. Tan

University of the Philippines Diliman

The Philippine Constabulary (PC) Band occupies a pivotal position in understanding new readings of Philippine-US colonial history. As an institutional musical group composed of Filipino musicians led by African-American bandmaster Walter Loving, the PC Band provided for the American Empire a strong symbolic representation of an attained social order within the colony through the band's renowned exemplary performances in international fairs and expositions, the inauguration of a US president, and well-attended invitational concerts in various parts of the US. Through exhibiting the PC Band in the mainland on several occasions, the US capitalized on Loving's effective leadership over the Filipino musicians and portrayed the band's musical excellence as a scaled-down version of what the empire had achieved in its colonial project in the Philippines. At the outset, this is how majority of American journalists reported the musical encounters between the PC Band and their audiences in the mainland in the years 1904, 1909, 1915, and 1939. Their reports are given a deeper and more critical interpretation by Mary Talusan in this remarkable addition to the scholarly scrutiny of, and meager publications on, Philippine music history.

Talusan's *Instruments of Empire: Filipino Musicians, Black Soldiers, and Military Band Music during US Colonization of the Philippines* (2021) provides the most comprehensive investigation of the legendary PC Band and its leadership, mainly through the numerous accounts of their performances in the US from American periodicals. It is relevant to note that these journalistic accounts were not circulated in the Philippines; thus, Talusan's archival research provides crucial details about the PC Band that make her work pioneering. Through her meticulous inspection of newspaper reports on the PC Band's performances at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, the presidential inauguration of Taft and the subsequent concert tour in various parts of the USA in 1909, the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915, and the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939—corroborated by interviews with

surviving musicians and family members of the key players in the band's history as well as published literature on the band tradition in the Philippines—Talusan's historical narrative reveals how the band was an important contact zone (Pratt), providing a space for the colonized to negotiate their burgeoning nationalist spirit that would culminate in the granting of independence in 1946. Alluding to the works of William Henry Scott, Reynaldo Ileto, Vicente Rafael, and Paul Kramer, Talusan traces the band's political responses to the various stages of the imperial domination of the Islands through deciphering hidden nuances in the hundreds of periodical reports during the highlighted years to allow the voices of the subjugated musicians and their contributions to be heard (45). Her chronological narrative that focuses on the PC Band's debut in the US in 1904 to their last documented tour in 1939 as the renamed Philippine Army Band exhibits the transformation of the Filipino musicians' "*loob*" (inner sensibilities) from a docile "little brown brother" to a disciplined colonial subject ready for sovereignty.

A notable contribution of this book is the use of "imperial ear" as a theoretical tool to bring to the fore important issues in colonial studies such as race, eugenics, mimicry/mimesis, silencing of the colonial subjects' voices, and the determined attempt of the colonizer to maintain power and domination. Throughout the book, Talusan repeatedly emphasizes that American audiences listened to the PC Band with an imperial ear which ignored the agency of the Filipino band musicians and regarded their highly renowned performances as mere products of mimicry, thus deeming them "imitative, culturally inauthentic, and invalid" (21). The imperial ear judged them as incapable of equipping their music-making with theoretical foundation, and the non-attainment of a serious artist's discipline. This discipline can only be developed over time through hard labor, intense focus, and irrefutable dedication toward excellence. In addition, Talusan emphasizes that the imperial ear was deaf to alternate readings of this musical phenomenon. The Americans believed that such display of extraordinary speed at mastering Western music and the playing of their musical instruments was born out of the Filipinos' innate natural musical talent and disregarded any development that was a result of education and disciplined practice. The imperial ear also paved the way for the belief that the attained artistic excellence of the Filipino band musicians was the product of American tutelage, completely disregarding the former's long history of playing music in regimental bands and the Catholic Church during the Spanish colonial period, and the established *banda* tradition that accounted for their possession of a memorized vast repertoire of music and extraordinary playing stamina that could last for hours without rest.

Through their imperial ear, Americans were persuaded to hear their voices as the only source of transformation that produced Filipino band musicians into

“orderly disciplined entities, embracing the traits of modernity and moving forward the ‘progress’ that [they] idealized and promoted” (50). It was made worse by the consistent erasure of Loving’s race in almost all of the newspaper accounts examined by the author, which is a crucial issue in understanding the dynamics of the social relations that developed between him and the Filipino musicians. The resulting high artistry displayed by the PC Band was, in most probability, developed through harmonious working relations based on trust and mutual respect. As Talusan argues, emphasizing Loving’s race would help explain the cultivated friendship and alliances amongst the musicians and their bandmaster because of their shared experience of the racist treatment by the White colonial masters. It is crucial to focus on Loving’s race as an African American because the PC Band was a group composed entirely of Filipinos, and Loving, as their leader, was the empire’s representation in ensuring the success of colonial tutelage and benevolent assimilation. The non-recognition of his contribution to the success of the empire in the history of Philippine music validates the Black community’s struggles for “racial uplift” and the White hegemony’s practice of “disengaged engagement”—a kind of listening that appreciated the aesthetics of Negro spirituals while disregarding the violence resulting from anti-Black racism (Cruz in Talusan 17)—in appreciating status-enriching European music played by musicians of color.

By emphasizing the lost histories and significant readings of colonial relations through hearing with an imperial ear, Talusan enlightens and challenges her readers to analyze history with a more critical listening ear that is sensitive to the nuances of the voices of subjugated others. Attention to the crucial details in colonial engagements, particularly the sensitivity to the sounds of resistance and negotiations, as well as the violent realities of domination, can provide hints at how the colonized responded to and interacted with the hegemonic imperial power in myriad ways of asserting their agency and identity. Applying sharp sensitivities to hearing with an alternative ear, perhaps an ear positioned in the very space where the subjugated others’ whispers (and silences) could be heard, allows us to participate in experiencing the nuances of history that may only be revealed when we listen quietly.

This book, being the first comprehensive examination of the history and contribution of the PC Band until it was renamed as the Philippine Army Band in 1936, is well-researched and groundbreaking. Talusan’s comprehensive examination of all the available written accounts in American periodicals about the PC Band’s sojourns makes her book unparalleled in terms of information gathered from primary sources. To contextualize her topic in the particular history of the Philippines during the US colonization, Talusan also surveyed all relevant books and essays on the musical and political history of the colony. Her work shows a marked propensity

toward ideas from recently published books written by US-based scholars, perhaps due to the depth in their analysis by using a range of cultural lenses and her close involvement with and understanding of diasporic authors, whose scholarly treatment of the subjugated position is based on experience, and who are thus able to make the Filipino spirit shine with unequal brilliance. The clever concept of “hearing with an imperial ear” as a theoretical frame resonates a deep longing for understanding the Filipino soul and is a pioneering addition to the scholarly tradition of works by Vicente Rafael, Christine Balance, Christi-Anne Castro, Lucy Mae Burns, and Jon Cruz, among others.

Instruments of Empire also fills an important gap in the band's history as very little has been written about its US sojourns by earlier Philippine-based scholars. Talusan, whose unique personal history, musical and educational training, and research orientation profoundly inform her work, is probably the ideal musicologist who can tell the important story of the PC Band to help the world understand how Filipinos used the very same instrument of the empire to announce their readiness for self-rule and emancipation from America's colonial grip. Her proximity to archives in the US as an Asian-American scholar allowed for the comprehensive collection and meticulous investigation of source materials that brought new insights on the history of an important achievement of Filipinos.

In her book, Talusan clarifies a number of ambiguous details in Philippine music history, foremost of which is her fact-based account of the PC Band's renowned performances at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. She provides a more informed chronology of events through the careful reconstruction of day-to-day periodical accounts. In most writings penned by Filipino music historians mentioning the PC Band, the legend of its uninterrupted performance during a blackout at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 and the second prize it won at the fair's band competition are always highlighted. Two important details of this story are constant in every telling: the continued playing of the band musicians despite the surprise of a power outage during a live performance and the astonishing feat of playing their pieces without scores. These have always been points of interest that appeal to the readers (and listeners) of the PC Band's history, which may be understood as a source of quiet pride for the Filipino race. The band's noteworthy playing of Western classics and national airs display the possession of “high culture” as early as the beginning of the colonial experience under the US. In addition, the performance also exhibited the band members' exceptional skills, their mastery of the instruments, and ability to play by memory. Moreover, their drive to keep on playing despite the adverse circumstances, emphasizes the commitment of Filipinos to be “true to their word” and deliver what is expected of them, embodying the values of “*amor propio*” (respect for one's self and concern for one's dignity and reputation) and “*may isang salita*”

(literally translated as “with one word,” which means adhering to one’s promises). Talusan cautiously reimagines the events that might have been carelessly celebrated as an astounding feat of the PC Band due to an article written in the *Philippines Free Press* in 1938, more than three decades after the actual event. Unfortunately, this periodical article seems to have been the source of the earlier accounts of music historians who replicated the inaccurate data. Talusan’s alternative version of the band’s achievement is more believable.

Another important factual correction resulting from Talusan’s meticulous regard for details is the rectification of an erroneous report in 1938 that the PC Band was accorded the first prize at the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915. The book discloses that the band received a bronze award and an honorable mention in the said competition. In addition, minute details about the life of the PC Band’s well-respected leader, Loving, also bring to light his character, which might have been what endeared him to Filipinos. Her poignant account of Loving’s dignified obedience to Japanese orders during the occupation of the Islands during the Second World War reveals admirable qualities that speak of honor. This account is accompanied by important snippets on the lives of Capt. Pedro B. Navarro and Lt. Alfonso Fresnido, which explain their short tenures as leaders of the band. The latter raises important questions that were left unanswered in earlier written histories of the band.

Worthy to note is Talusan’s fluid writing style, which makes reading her book a pleasant experience. There are two short sections in the book where she narrates her personal connection to her research subject, and the language she utilizes in telling these stories is even more engaging. The author’s personal account of how she became interested in unearthing historical information to address questions that arose as she slowly grasped the significance of her great grandfather’s involvement and contribution to the legendary PC Band is an inspiring anecdote which might provide some insights to younger researchers on how passion toward a certain research topic can be triggered and eventually nurtured.

This book is an important contribution to the understanding of the special role of music in history, particularly the complex interaction between the colonizer and the colonized in empire/colonial studies. The PC Band has been steadily regarded as a significant instrument of the American Empire’s success in civilizing the Filipinos, but more worthy of attention is what Talusan advances in her book, which looks at the band as the colonial subjects’ counter-instrument in asserting their agency. Negating the imperial ear consistently imposed by the American press and applied by the American public in hearing the PC Band, Talusan encourages the careful listening to the inner sentiments of the musicians who played music that made the

PC Band a legendary musical group. More importantly, their performances aimed to make the Filipino spirit and sensibilities unmistakable in order to proclaim to the world that the Filipino race is worthy of a sovereign nation. This exceptional book is a highly recommended reading for scholars interested in colonial/post-colonial studies and historical musicology, as well as those who study and write about music of the Philippines.

WORKS CITED

- Cruz, Jon. *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation*. Princeton UP, 1999.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 1992.
- Schenbeck, Lawrence. *Racial Uplift and American Music*. UP of Mississippi, 2012.
- Talusan, Mary. *Instruments of Empire: Filipino Musicians, Black Soldiers, and Military Band Music during US Colonization of the Philippines*. UP of Mississippi, 2021.

Arwin Q. Tan (aqtan@up.edu.ph) is associate professor of musicology at the University of the Philippines College of Music. He is the editor of *Saysay Himig: A Sourcebook on Philippine Music History, 1880-1941* (UP Press, 2018) and curator of its accompanying 3-CD recording of transcultural music from the late nineteenth century. His dissertation, "Music, Labor, and Capitalism in Manila's Transforming Colonial Society of the Late Nineteenth Century" received the 2nd honorary mention in the International Musicological Society Outstanding Dissertation Award from Switzerland in 2020. He is the conductor of the four-time Anin ng Dangal awardee, Novo Concertante Manila, currently ranked third among the top 1000 mixed choirs of the world by Interkultur, Germany. He sits on the advisory board of the newly launched Berlin-based choral institution, ChoralSpace.