

MARÍA CLARA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Filipino Responses to “Neo-Colonial” Encounters

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Abstract

As an example of a postcolonial critique to certain hegemonic Spanish discourses in the Philippines, this essay examines the practice-as-research dance piece *Love, Death, and Mompou* (2006), which was a revision of the traditional *María Clara* dance suite. It argues that the show uses the expressiveness of the body as a trigger to subvert, re-represent and perform a range of “colonial” discourses that were reinforced by Spanish cultural producers, through funding policies, such as the Spanish Program for Cultural Cooperation. In this context, this essay argues that these policies echo a colonial past by influencing the local arts scene, and by establishing what can be perceived as a “neo-colonial” relationship between Spanish official institutions and those local artists involved in the arts events.

Keywords

arts funding, dance, María Clara performance, Philippine-Spanish relationships, postcolonial studies

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In October 2006, a Filipino dance performance entitled *Love, Death, and Mompou* was featured as one of the main events of the Spanish Festival for Culture and the Arts in Manila.¹ The show was funded by Spanish institutions as it was “in line” with the objectives of Spanish arts funding at the time. The proposal stated that the performance had clear links with Spain, as it used the music of Catalan composer Federico Mompou (1893-1987), and it also aimed to explore the relationships between the Philippines and Spain. The link here was the Spanish-influenced Filipino folk dance entitled “María Clara,” a suite of dances that dates to Spanish colonial times in the Philippines. The choreographers chose this particular set of dances as an inspiration for their new performance.

This show is an example of the type of local events that Spanish institutions are happy to sponsor, as it helps the Spanish cultural producers in the Philippines make Spain or anything “Hispanic” more prominent in the Philippines. In the period 2000–2012, there was a steady increase in the amounts of Spanish funding dedicated to Filipino events with a Spanish flavor, most of which were organized in Metro Manila. In this context, the arts and its funding policies as directed by Spanish institutions are politically charged, and it can be argued that they are immersed in a field of power, in which those who possess the funds also have the power to influence the arts scene. The funders are those “gate-keepers” who decide what is to be produced and what is to be presented to the public. Furthermore, in the Spanish-Philippine case, and due to the historical relationship between the two countries, this relation of power echoes a colonial past, in which the ex-colonial power is, once again, influencing the ex-colony through its arts funding policies. However, in this regulated system, there is also a way to voice discontent and dissent, and the *Love, Death, and Mompou* performance was a very good example. Perhaps prior to the show, those who went to the theater, including the Spanish funders and the Filipino general public, thought that they were going to watch a traditional *María Clara* Suite with a modern twist. However, the shock came when realizing that *Love, Death, and Mompou* was a thought-provoking piece that conveyed new meanings to the traditional dance, criticized Spain as an ex-colonizer, and, as a result, became a strong postcolonial statement.

The main purpose of this article is to explore this dance piece, arguing that it presents a direct critique not only of the Spanish legacy in the Philippines, but also of the new thrust in Spanish expenditure in cultural events in the Philippines (and more particularly in Metro Manila) in the first decade of the 21st century.

THE POLITICS OF FUNDING: FITTING INTO A FOREIGN AGENDA

Love, Death, and Mompou was one of the many cultural events that was funded and promoted by Spanish institutions in Metro Manila. Since the late 1990s, these cultural institutions, such as the *Instituto Cervantes* (IC),² have steadily increased their expenditure on managing and implementing cultural activities in Manila (Díaz). Since Spain and the Philippines share a colonial past that spanned for over three centuries, many of the cultural activities organized by Spanish institutions have focused on the colonial relationship, bringing back to today's Philippines many of the old colonial discourses. Furthermore, the many Spanish cultural events organized have been in competition with local Filipino arts activities, contributing to the establishment of a direct flow of foreign input in the arts scene of Metro Manila. In this context, it can be argued that there is some kind of a subtle "neo-colonial" discourse underlying the politics of Spanish arts funding in Manila.

An example of this discourse can be found in the politics surrounding the Spanish Program for Cultural Cooperation (SPCC),³ established in 1997 between the Spanish Ministry of Culture and universities in the Pacific, which had a historical (colonial) relationship with Spain. At this point, it is worth examining this program, as it was the main source of funding of our case study, *Love, Death, and Mompou*.

The SPCC aims to foster cultural relationships between Spain and the Philippines by offering grants to research and cultural projects that focus on Spain or "Phil-Hispanic" relationships. The program was originally administered by a panel of academics from the Ateneo de Manila University, but it was transferred to the Spanish Instituto Cervantes in Manila in 2004, when the program was re-launched with the slogan "Toward a Common Future."

The SPCC, as any other similar funding program, is constantly defining and re-defining what constitutes research and, consequently, it is constantly making authoritative statements on what types of arts and cultural events are worth promoting. By selecting certain projects among all of those that enter the competition, statements are made about the meanings of concepts such as "Hispanic," "Fil-Hispanic" or "common heritage." Therefore, the "common future" that is promoted in the slogan relates to an idea of authority in terms of Philippine research projects. The "future," in this case, relates to a conscious decision of the Spanish Government to influence the area of academic research in the Philippines in two ways. On the one hand, the "common future" is that of Filipino academics researching on contemporary Spain or Spanish history and, on the other hand, it is a "common future" in which those academics focus their research on revisiting the colonial past, or making Filipinos aware of "Hispanic" traces in their heritage. In many ways, this program echoes some aspects from the shared colonial history.

If during colonial times, the Spaniards had the power to control and disseminate knowledge in the colonized territories; these systems are replicated in the 21st century through this funding program, by focusing on the production of knowledge about Spanish heritage in the Philippines. In this context, it is not surprising that Spanish funding policies have been subjected to postcolonial criticism in the Philippines.

POSTCOLONIAL RESPONSES AND APPROACHES

In one of my visits to Manila, I had the chance to interview some Filipino artists who had previously participated in cultural events funded by Spanish institutions. Apart from Cynthia Lapeña (who co-choreographed *Love, Death, and Mompou*), I also interviewed choreographer Jose Jay Cruz,⁴ who expressed his views about the role of the IC and other foreign cultural institutions in the Philippines, as follows:

I always argued about the projects that they [IC] did. I used to say: If you [IC] keep doing the projects that you do, and you are in this country, there is a big question about the cultural activity, because you can become a mere instrument of neo-colonialism; and, how do you create a dialogue that doesn't foster neo-colonialism, but create real, authentic cooperation? The fact is that Instituto [IC] has actually created so much that I am, consciously and subconsciously, influenced by them. (Cruz)

In this statement, Cruz establishes a clear division between foreign cultural institutions and the host country where they are based. Bringing this to the Philippine-Spanish context, it means that the historical past has to be acknowledged. If some kind of “cultural control” or pressure was attained in colonial times, the Spanish cultural producers are perceived by Cruz as “neo-colonizers” who are still establishing the parameters of cultural and artistic production in Manila. The point here is the uneasiness that brings to many Filipinos the existence of foreign cultural producers who can “control” them, rather than “cooperate” with them. In my interview with Cruz, he calls for an acknowledgement of the game of “position taking,” so every party who enters the game is very clear about their actions and the motivations behind them.⁵ Furthermore, this particular critique is an appeal to ethics, as an essential factor to consider in this kind of transnational encounter. There is a clear concern in his statements that relate to anxiousness about an old colonial phantom that keeps haunting the Philippines.

Cruz's comments can be described as a postcolonial critique of the systems set by Spanish official institutions in Manila. His position is, in this case, that of a Filipino artist who has participated in some of the cultural events organized by the

IC. He is reflecting on those experiences and problematizing the effects of Spanish cultural promotion in Manila. This type of critique can be labeled as “postcolonial,” because it focuses on discussing the consequences of certain hegemonic practices that relate to the Philippines in connection with the historical colonial relationship with Spain.

Postcolonial theories and approaches have been subjected to criticism in recent years, and have even been described as “an exhausted paradigm” (Wilson, Sandru, and Welsh 1). However, recent research stresses the many new directions that the discipline is taking, including global and transnational studies (Wilson, Sandru, and Welsh 2), the acknowledgment of new “parapostcolonial” interdisciplinary approaches (Pett, Bocking-Welch, and Hesse), as well as critiques of contemporary neo-colonial relationships (Hiddleston). This neo-imperialist critique has been examined by Filipino scholars, such as Fernando Zialcita (2005) and F. Sionil José (2008), who focus on the influence of foreign powers in current Philippines. Even more recently, J. Neil Garcia’s work entitled *The Postcolonial Perverse* (2014) is proof of the currency and importance of postcolonial criticism in the Philippines.

In *Philippine Postcolonial Studies*, Priscelina Patajo-Legasto defines the term postcolonial as “a position produced by being constructed or represented as Europe or America’s ‘ontological Other’” (3), arguing for a definition of Philippine Studies as:

an inquiry about the Philippines and Filipinos . . . to liberate ourselves [Filipinos] from the legacies of Spanish and American colonialist discourses and the continuing power of Western hegemony, that have metamorphosed into discourses of globalization. (Patajo-Legasto, “Philippine Postcolonial” xxxiii)

This line of inquiry evidences that the Spanish colonial period is still a sensitive topic in the Philippines, a country where, as sociologist Fernando Zialcita explains: “Almost any major problem of the Filipino today is attributed to ‘colonial’ influence, particularly the Spanish” (11). Furthermore, he suggests that in the Philippines there is still “a claim that all Spanish influence is evil” (23). In line with this type of critiques, which discuss the consequences of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines, a postcolonial statement was made in 2006 in the form of a dance performance.

CONTESTING COLONIAL DISCOURSES BY DANCING THE “GAY MARÍA CLARA”

Love, Death, and Mompou was the official title of the dance show that was funded by the SPCC. It was also part of the Spanish Festival for Culture and the Arts, organized by the IC and the Embassy of Spain in Manila in 2006. The show was performed once at the RCBC Carlos Romulo Theatre in Makati, and twice at the campus theater in the De La Salle – College of St. Benilde in Manila.

As a strong critique of Spanish colonial discourses, I argue that *Love, Death, and Mompou* is a unique example of a postcolonial response to hegemonic discourses, in the context of recent Spanish promotional and funding policies in Metro Manila, by contesting traditional colonial narratives. I have chosen this particular case study for a variety of reasons, which explain its uniqueness:

1. The show offered a direct critique and response to Spanish traditional colonial discourses.
2. A live performance, including dance and music, was the means by which colonial discourses were contested, undercutting the Spanish colonial control of written language.
3. By featuring the show in the Spanish Festival in Manila in 2006, the postcolonial critique was made within the parameters of the systems created and perpetuated by Spanish cultural institutions in Metro Manila.
4. Since the project was funded by the SPCC, which mainly commissions academic research on Spanish-Philippine relationships, it undermined traditional research in terms of its format, methodology, scope, and critique.

Love, Death, and Mompou was conceived in 2006 by two dance practitioners, and it was performed by Filipino company Benildanze, which was based at De La Salle-College of St. Benilde (in Manila). This dance company was originally known in Manila as *Filipinescas*, an innovative dance company founded in the 1960s by Filipino National Artist Leonor Orosa Goquingco, and active as such until 1974. Declan Patrick explains that:

the company was innovative in the 1960s because of Mrs. Goquingco's unique style. She pioneered Philippine theatrical folk dance using balletic principles, and showed the resulting work around the world, to great acclaim, in a series of tours. (“Contesting the Narratives” 12)

In 2004, Goquingco wanted to revive *Filipinescas*, and was awarded a one-million-peso grant from the Philippine National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) for this purpose. In 2005, the company performed Goquingco's most famous choreography: "Philippine Life, Legend and Lore in Dance" at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (Patrick, "Contesting the Narratives" 13). However, the choreographer died in 2005, and the company was taken over by the College of St. Benilde, becoming Benildanze in 2006. The focus shifted then from folk dance "Goquingco-style" to a more contemporary approach which included in its repertoire dance-theater, ballet, contemporary, and Filipino folk dance, combining a variety of genres, sometimes, within the same performance. Benildanze was active until 2007, and it was then absorbed by the *Romançon Company* from the same college.

One of Benildanze's many ventures in 2006 was to apply for a grant from Spanish institutions. After lengthy conversations with the SPCC board at the time, the project was funded as an academic practice-as-research art event, with a strong Spanish component, and therefore, worthy of Spanish funds. The piece was to explore the cultural relationships between Spain and the Philippines. The result was the performance piece entitled *Love, Death, and Mompou*.

In terms of its structure, the performance comprised two parts: the *María Clara Suite*, choreographed by Benildanze's Executive Director Cynthia Lapeña, and the *Mompou Suite*, choreographed by the company's Artistic Director Declan Patrick,⁶ both pieces with some input from Filipino choreographer Jerohme Borrromeo. In my interviews with Lapeña and Patrick, they explained many aspects of the performance, including its intended meaning, what they perceived as its subversive elements, and the reactions that the show provoked. In order to understand these issues, it is important to establish some background to the major themes underlying this cultural event.

As an expert in Filipino folk dance, both as a dancer and a choreographer, Lapeña wanted to discuss Spanish colonial influences on Filipinos through reworking the classic, Spanish-influenced, Filipino folk dance suite entitled *María Clara*. Patrick, on his part, as a theater practitioner originally from New Zealand, was interested in exploring traditional colonial narratives and the different ways they could be contested. Furthermore, he wanted to explore the *María Clara Suite* through the dancers' movement and expression to the music of Catalan composer Federico Mompou. As a whole, the show had many Spanish elements from the outset.

The choice of the *María Clara Suite* is very significant. It is part of the five suites of dances that are usually performed by Philippine dance companies within the Filipino dance folkloric canon. "It is a collection of dances that represents both a

physical area—the urban dwelling, lowland Christianized Filipinos—and a theme also; courtship and love in the Spanish colonial Philippines of the nineteenth century” (Patrick, “Contesting the Narratives” 83). Regarded as the most “Western” influenced dance within that canon, a specific dance from this suite, the *Cariñosa*, was considered by many dance critics the unofficial national dance of the Philippines for many years, due to its popularity. However, officially, it never acquired that status (Patrick, “Contesting the Narratives” 83, 84).

DISCOURSES ON MARÍA CLARA

Originally, María Clara was a fictional character from the landmark novel by Filipino writer José Rizal (1861–1896), *Noli Me Tangere*, and it is worth exploring the different layers of signification that “María Clara” has acquired in the Philippines over the years. *Noli Me Tangere*, which was originally written in Spanish, is important in Philippine history as it symbolizes “the end of Spanish colonial rule and the fight for the country’s independence” (Guardiola 23). Furthermore, José Rizal,

a hero in the Philippines, is one of its most charismatic personalities: Supporter of his country’s modernization and of the construction of the Philippines as a nation. Political and social leader. Enlightened humanist. Holder of degrees in Medicine and in humanities. Active ophthalmologist. Researcher of History and Grammar. Linguist who spoke more than ten languages . . . Indefatigable traveler. Outstanding champion of his time. (Elizalde 22)

In Rizal’s book, the gentle character of María Clara is portrayed as symbol of the Philippines, and clearly linked to the concept of hybridity, which is evident in the following description of her by the protagonist of the novel, Crisóstomo Ibarra:

It seemed to me that you were the fairy, the spirit, the poetic incarnation of my Motherland, beautiful, plain, kind, innocent, a daughter of the Philippines, of this lovely country that unites the greatest virtues of *Madre España* with the beautiful qualities of a young country, as it combines in its being all that is lovely and beautiful about both races, and this is why my love for you and my Motherland merge into one. (Rizal 103)⁷

Interestingly, the idea of María Clara as hybrid also comes from the fact that, in the novel, she is actually the daughter of a Filipina and a Spanish priest. This feature of María Clara has been discussed by academic Nick Joaquin, who is very critical of her as a symbol of the country, stating that

the figure of *María Clara* . . . continues to scandalize us [Filipinos]. Why did Rizal choose for a heroine a mestiza of shameful conception? [...] Whether she was a heroine to him or not, she is no heroine to us; and all the folk notions of *María Clara* as an ideal or a symbol of the Mother Country, must be discarded. (Joaquin, “A Question” 65)

Nevertheless, she has become this “ideal” in several ways. These symbolic connections between María Clara and the Philippines were emphasized in an emblematic conference which focused on the centennial of the country’s independence (in 1998). In this context, academic Edmundo F. Litton described (metaphorically) the Philippine educational experience of the 20th century as the “marriage between María Clara and Uncle Sam” (83). In this equation, he explains, “María Clara is the personification of the Philippines” (83), stressing Rizal’s description of this character as “innocent” (83). Uncle Sam stands, of course, for the United States, and this “marriage” represents a power relationship between him (the colonizer) and María Clara (the colonized).

Furthermore, apart from these symbolic connections between María Clara and the Philippine nation (both through the *Cariñosa* dance, and as an “ideal” for the country), the character of María Clara has also influenced the construction of Filipino women up to the present day (Quindoza-Santiago 1996; Ellwood-Clayton 2006; Pandý 2015). This stereotypical aspect of María Clara as performing a particular gender role (which is present to a certain extent in the Suite of Dances) has been subjected to feminist criticism in contemporary Philippine studies. As Leila Grace Pandý explains:

Despite Rizal’s intentions to critique and subvert the Catholic institution and Spanish colonialism for Filipino empowerment, María Clara became a tool of disempowerment and docility for Filipinas during the 1900s and 2000s. (Pandý 16)

In this context, “María Clara is the fantasy of the barrio girl, docile, innocent, and almost pastoral and romanticized” (22). It is close to this line of thinking, that Lilia Quindoza-Santiago discusses how images that are projected in the media about women focus on certain characteristics, such as

being faithful and sweet, being pretty, with a smooth porcelain-like skin, having a sweet breath, being loving and caring, being charming and alluring, in effect, a sex symbol . . . These negative stereotyped roles of women have been around for a century. Rizal, by virtue of his women characters in his two novels, started us off with the stereotypes of María Clara and Sisa. (Quindoza-Santiago 169)

However, in his “appreciation” of the Rizal novels, Nick Joaquin (2012) explained that those who are very critical of María Clara are not really attacking Rizal’s creation. This is, firstly, because Rizal “nowhere announced that he was going to depict an ‘ideal woman’ or an ‘ideal Filipino woman’” (Joaquin, “The Novels”). Furthermore, he believes that since the 1920s,

María Clara was recreated as a Victorian—which she never was (...) [this] is a sentimentalizing, a vulgarization of the Rizal heroine; and it is this stock-figure that the critics have been attacking with such relish. Rizal saw a woman who was firm, clean, honest, graceful, devout, dignified, modest, tender, and true. (Joaquin, “The Novels”)

It is perhaps this discourse of the “Victorian María Clara” which, according to Leila Grace Pandý, entails a stereotypical “colonial” representation of femininity that can be connected to the current exploitation of many Filipinas. Pandý argues that María Clara is a key figure in structuring gender roles, such as “the desirable virgin” or “the sex worker” (24).

Similarly, Ellwood-Clayton explains that “the character of María Clara has come to be symbolic of the virtues and nobility of Filipina women” (6). She believes that there are three main femininity models for Filipinas, namely the María Clara, the Manila girl, and the other Mary. In this model, the Manila girl “gives credence both to traditionalism (María Clara virtue), but also positions herself as forward thinking and cosmopolitan” (7). On the extreme, the “other Mary” derives “from gender ideologies based on Spanish-influenced postulates of honor and shame” (6). In these descriptions, the “María Clara” and the “other Mary” can be perceived as connected to the “Virgin” vs. the “sinful girl” dichotomy. It is largely this version of María Clara that is represented in the traditional Suite of Dances, in which the lovers cannot touch, and the male dancers are those who actively “woo” the female dancers. These prescriptive gender roles are essential to understand the traditional dance-piece, and the way that *Love, Death, and Mompou* challenges them, as I discuss later on.

Despite this criticism of the influence of the María Clara character on the exploitation of women, Quindoza-Santiago points at a new future for women, hoping that

the new history of women’s lives and struggles has been started and it will not be long before the dismantling of the symbolic order in which María Clara has been ensconced as the principal model for the Filipinas takes place. It is very possible that she will be replaced by some other symbol of womanhood in Philippine society. (Quindoza 171)

In many ways, *Love, Death, and Mompou* connects to this new symbolic order, and it achieves this by subverting and adding new layers of meaning to traditional versions of María Clara, as portrayed in the popular suite of dances.

SUBVERTING MARÍA CLARA

In *Love, death, and Mompou*, through reworking the *María Clara Suite*, Cynthia Lapeña focused on the Philippine-Spanish relationship in particular. She states that the piece was “[...] about how one rich culture (the Philippines) is invaded by another culture (Spain) and how, through colonization, Spain changed the indigenous culture to mimic theirs, never mind that it did not suit the people perfectly” (Lapeña). This was the major theme running through Lapeña’s version of the traditional Filipino folk dance suite. The effects of Spanish colonization are connected to processes of mimicry, homogeneity, forced change, and loss:

In the end, Spanish culture and civilization triumph so that the Filipino dancers are no longer free, easy, or spontaneous. They become precise in their movements, sophisticated, and stiff. They have been completely colonized and lost their identity, their uniqueness, and their differences (Lapeña).

Indeed, Lapeña’s *María Clara Suite* followed a strong narrative in which the process of Spanish colonialism was retold through the dance. One of the most interesting aspects was Lapeña’s use of the “Muslim Princess,” a character from the Mindanao Suite of Dances, as an outsider who watches the colonizing process. At the beginning of the show, the Muslim Princess walks on stage with her slave. She is an observer. She was there before the Spaniards arrived. She observes as the dancers’ movement changes from freedom to stiffness. However, even though the dancers are “taught” how to dance the new steps of the *María Clara Suite*, some of them keep their originality, remaining reluctant to mimic the rules imposed by the Spanish. At the end of the Suite, the Muslim Princess comes back, and laughs as she realizes that the new colonizers could not control as much as they wanted.

The second part of the show, the *Mompou Suite*, represented colonialism in a post-dramatic way, in which the narrative was not as important as exploring specific ideas through a range of contexts, using image, costuming, voice, and contemporary dance. On this motivation to explore ideas of domination within the boundaries of colonialism, Declan Patrick explains that the piece was ‘intended to engage with the issues and narratives around colonization, mostly to contest the accepted dichotomy of colonialism as being “good” or “bad”’ (Patrick, Interview). In his *Mompou Suite* Patrick wanted to examine “the contemporary effects of



Fig. 1. Benildanze's *The María Clara Suite in Love, Death, and Mompou* in 2006. (Photo: Dino M. Reyes, courtesy of Benildanze)

colonization, exploring an alienation from a perceived cultural identity, and a search for coherent, constructed post-colonial identity” (Patrick, Interview). This process of a search for ‘identity’ was a common theme in the *Mompou Suite*. A particular way in which this was signaled in the show was through costuming. In Patrick’s piece, costumes can be understood as signs of the whole process. At the beginning of the dance, the performers come to the stage with costumes which contain traditional elements from the *María Clara Suite*. However, as the performance style changes, they start removing and adapting their costumes. The men, for instance, take off their jackets and shirts, and the women take off their shawls and shoes. In a way, this was also signaling freedom and the surpassing of traditional (colonial) viewpoints.



Fig. 2. Benildanze's *The Mompou Suite* in Love, Death, and Mompou in 2006. (Photo: Dino M. Reyes, courtesy of Benildanze).

Another strong discourse in Patrick's suite was the deconstruction of identity. This was achieved by having some of the characters watching themselves on video. In the video, some of the performers watch themselves screaming or dancing, as in some kind of delirium, trying to understand and incorporate their new identities. One dancer, for instance, watched himself on a big television screen, telling himself how worthless he was. Eventually some ghostly figures crawled out of the TV to attack him. He was being attacked by his own fears, a consequence of the violent colonial experience. Several scenes of the *Mompou Suite* depicted this post-colonial sense of "identity crisis." Each of the dancers at some point follows the steps of the group, but at other times, they dance alone, scorned by the others. In one scene, for instance, a dancer's cell phone starts ringing. After a while, he stops dancing



Fig. 3. Benildanze's *The Mompou Suite in Love, Death, and Mompou* in 2006. (Photo: Dino M. Reyes, courtesy of Benildanze).

and answer the phone, which makes the whole performance stop. Everyone waits for this person to stop talking to keep dancing together. In conclusion, the dancers' identity is not unified; it is fragmented, and individual, and constantly changing and evolving.

Apart from these specific statements about "identity" that were intended to be made through the different art forms in the performance, the show contained several subversive elements in relation to the context which surrounded it. The show was subversive in the Philippine context in which it was presented for two main reasons. First, in terms of the structure, Patrick mentions the use of "two very different expressive genres, contemporary performance practice and folk dance" as subversive in the Philippine art scene. In Lapeña's piece, for instance, the interaction of characters from the *Muslim Suite* and the *María Clara Suite* challenged the

traditional version, which portrays two very different “worlds.” Furthermore, in Lapeña’s *María Clara*, the dancers performed to an original musical score by Jethro Joaquin, a composer at De La Salle University. While Joaquin’s music was loosely based on the traditional *María Clara*, it did not use the specific recordings (and traditional instruments), which are usually recreated in folk dance festivals.

Regarding these specific challenges to the format of traditional shows, Lapeña explains that most Philippine folk dance shows are just showcases of artistry and technique. Lapeña’s reworking of traditional Philippine folk dance was already a challenge to those performed traditional festivals, which recreate similar art forms year after year. This fact was also acknowledged in the local press which explained that:

The 30-minute *María Clara Suite* choreographed by the company’s executive director, Cynthia Lapeña-Amador is not your traditional *María Clara* performed to *rondalla* music of polkas, *vales*, *mazurkas*⁸ and the like. Neither does this suite demonstrate the traditional ballroom dance steps typically used in the *María Clara* dances of folk dance troupes. This Suite shows glimpses of the dances we are familiar with, but with a different twist. It focuses on flirtation as the spice of love and courtship. Flirtation among couples and in groups has been a favorite pastime of the young and young-at-heart. This suite explores flirtation in variations set against the mores and culture of Spanish Philippines. (“Benildanze performs *Love, Death, and Mompou*”)

The flirtation to which the article refers to is another specific feature of Lapeña’s version of the *María Clara*. In the traditional piece gender roles are clearly marked as “male” and “female,” and performed in a traditional way in which the male dancers are those who woo and court the female characters. These, in turn, flirt with them in a more “passive” way, offering different signals of approval through the use of fans, and corporal expressions. The traditional suite (and the *Cariñosa* in particular), “entails the whole heavy weight of the political construction of the institution of marriage, as well as the social construction of courtship” (Patrick, “Filipino Folk Dance” 412). In contrast to this, Lapeña and Borromeo subverted the canon by shifting those gender roles, and bringing to the dance the figure of the *bakla*.

Even though the word *bakla* is defined by the *Vicassan’s Pilipino-English Dictionary* as “a womanish man; hermaphrodite, gay, and homosexual” (Santos 32), none of these words explain fully the connotations and discourses of the figure of the *bakla* in the Philippines and, in particular, in Metro Manila. As Garcia explains, “despite the fact that the Philippines has had a very long tradition of indigenous gender-crossing or *kabaklaan*, we must not readily accept Western accounts of Philippine transgenderism” (“Performativity” 53). This is important in the context

of Lapeña's *María Clara Suite*, as the *bakla* appears not just dressing in the María Clara costume, but learning and assimilating the colonizers' rules of seduction from the women in the show. The *bakla* is not cross-dressing (in the Western sense), but, as William Peterson explains (following Garcia), "also externally manifesting their true internal selves by occupying the space of the third sex—that is, by being constitutionally *bakla* from birth" (Peterson 600). This comes from the fact that gender identities are not as clear-cut in the Philippines as in other countries. As Garcia clarifies, even though "there is a bipolar male/female (*lalaki/babae*) genito-sexual categorization in the Philippines, on the level of gender there may be more than just the masculine and the feminine" ("Performativity" 58). Following this range of gender identities Lapeña and Borromeo (in their *María Clara Suite*):

utilized the idea of the *bakla* to parody and undermine the accepted version of courtship within the dances. In the inscribed extant versions, the dances show how a woman and man should behave during courtship. In the Lapeña and Borromeo version, the *bakla* learns how to behave "like a lady" from a Spanish woman. He then uses this knowledge to compete against her, and win, the sexual and emotional attentions of the Filipino and Spanish men. This embodied research allowed a different experience of the *Suite* for an audience, and for the dancers. This generated knowledge that challenged the ways in which all participants understood the dances, and the ways in which they viewed the dances' place in the accepted historical narrative. (Patrick, Interview)

From a historical point of view, the inclusion of a *bakla* in a Spanish-inspired dance is not too "out of place." As Garcia demonstrates, during Spanish colonial times:

gender-crossing was already very much a reality in a number of communities across the entire archipelago. Local men dressed up as—and acting like—women were called, among others, *bayoguin*, *bayok*, *agi-ngin*, *asog*, *bido*, and *binabae*. [However] the gender-crosser herself progressively suffered from the ridicule and scorn which only the Spanish brand of medieval Mediterranean machismo could inflict . . . [T]he native feminine man (*bayoguin*) in the Tagalog regions of Luzon slowly but surely transmogrified into *bakla*, a word which had originally meant "confused" and/or "cowardly." ("Nativism" 53)

In this context, by including the *bakla* in the *María Clara Suite*, Lapeña is making a strong statement against the Spanish colonial power which scorned more flexible notions of gender. Furthermore, the connections between traditionally marginalized groups, such as the *bakla*, and the colonized subject were some of the most subversive elements of the piece, as Patrick states:

The linking of the figure of the *bakla* and *sward*,⁹ with the homosexual associations that come with those roles, in association with the figure of the colonized was also very subversive, as it equated resistance to colonization with marginal and marginalized figures (Patrick, Interview).

In fact, even though the *baklas* are prominent in many urban barangays and towns, they are still marginalized in many cases. Regarding the current prominence of *bakla* in Metro Manila, Peterson explains that they

run the hair salons, nail parlors, and dress-making shops—all relatively lucrative professions that ensure ongoing employment, especially in the context of the lower-class/working-poor barrios in which many of them live. Their boyfriends are (stereo) typically “real men” and not homosexuals or other *bakla*. (599-600)

Moreover, they are also prominent on television, gay beauty pageants held in many barangays in Metro Manila (see Garcia, “Performativity”), and even performing Western, Asian and local acts in the ongoing “Amazing Show” performed at the Manila Film Centre (CCP Complex) in Pasay. But despite this extensive visibility, the figure of the *bakla* is still marginalized. Garcia mentions that

The *bakla* remains quite distinct by virtue of the following fact: he is burdened not only by his gender self-presentation, but also, and more tragically, by his “sexual orientation,” a biomedical ascription capable of defining who he is, as a matter of deep psychological being, as an innermost question of self. (“Nativism” 55)

This current “burden” of the *bakla* explains in many ways the strong disturbance that the ‘Love, Death, and Mompou’ show caused among the audience. In fact, the discussion of gender within the genre of folk dance was the most powerful statement that the show made. The audience reaction was so strong that the show ended up being colloquially referred to as the “Gay María Clara” (Lapeña). Patrick also comments that, even when the show was performed at the university, it caused even more upheaval and many of his colleagues at the College “wanted to censor the work as they felt it was too controversial to be shown in an academic context” (Patrick, Interview). Lapeña, on her part, received several comments from audience members. The show was described as “radical and different from other dances,” “amazing,” “very subversive, a very strong statement against Spain,” and “intellectually stimulating and disturbing” (Lapeña).

The inclusion of the show within the boundaries of Spanish frameworks (the fact that it was funded by the SPCC and featured in the 2006 Spanish Festival) is another reason why the show was subversive in relation to its context. As Patrick states, “showing the work in the Spanish festival was very subversive, as there

was a clear criticism of Spanish roles within the Philippines” (Patrick, Interview). This type of criticism is extremely rare in Spanish funded cultural events in the Philippines, and so it made the show unique in its form and its critique. Even though Lapeña asserts that the piece “is an off-hand compliment to Spain” by showing how “Spanish culture has made an indelible impression on Philippine culture,” she is also fully aware of how subversive it was in its context, as she explains:

Most likely, another choreographer/producer would have put on a show that praised Spain and glorified the Spanish colonization of the Philippines because it was sponsored by the Spanish Cultural Centre. I wanted this work to be different and important in that it made a very loud and clear statement that the Spain of the conquistadors and the friars had colonized lands by trying to wipe out indigenous cultures and superimposing their own, but that would never end up a good thing (Lapeña).

The piece, then, can be understood as a postcolonial statement, in the sense that it was consciously conceived as a critique to Spanish colonialism and its consequences for Filipinos. In my interview with Lapeña, her comments were constantly moving back and forth between the colonial past and the present of the Philippines, as if trying to find answers in the past to today’s preoccupations. In a reflection on the performance context and its timeliness, she even states: “I would have been imprisoned for that piece if I staged it a little over a century ago!” (Lapeña) However, in 2006 the show could be performed and discussed, even though it was very unusual in the Manila contemporary dance scene. This type of performance connects with a traditional understanding of theatre as a social tool for change in the Philippines but, as recently as 2007, some Filipino theater practitioners believe that that trend was over, as playwright and academic Malou Jacob explains:

Philippine theatre seems to have lost its way again. It has degenerated into a mere venue for entertainment, not answering the needs of the country it helped create. Indeed, why isn’t it addressing poverty, corruption, war? Why hasn’t it helped the country eradicate the vestiges of Spanish colonization by tearing away at the disunity among the *Indio*, *Lumad*, and *Moro* Filipinos? Why has it lost its healing power?¹⁰ (32-36)

Jacob’s ideas of performance are those of subversion and denunciation, as well as transformation. Theater is perceived as a tool against certain Spanish colonial influences in the Asian country. At the core of this viewpoint, there is Jacob’s perception of the disunity among several ethnic groups in the Philippines as a consequence of Spanish colonialism. Furthermore, this concept of “disconnection” or “disunity” has to do with that of a constant search for a Filipino “identity,” which is another idea that is present in *Love, Death, and Mompou*. When commenting on these matters, Lapeña explains that, through processes of mimicry during both the

Spanish and the American periods in the Philippines, the search for an identity is still an important issue for Filipinos:

This happened not only with the Spaniards but is still happening now, as Filipinos desperately try to become more like Westerners, particularly like Americans. In many ways, it is ridiculous and sad, that Filipinos should want to throw away their identity. After all, there are ways of assimilating culture without losing your own identity. Time and again, Filipinos will mimic foreigners and will get the “song and dance” perfect, but deep inside them, they will be unable to reconcile the differences in history and spirit. (Lapeña)

The show, then, becomes not only a commentary on Spanish colonialism, but also a discussion on current issues that affect Filipinos and that, ultimately, has its origins in the island’s colonial history. In *Love, Death, and Mompou*, the performers embark on a “voyage” through history, in which they constantly search for and question several notions of identity. In Lapeña’s piece, this is achieved by exploring the concept of “othering” in several ways. From the Moro occupation, represented in the show by the Muslim Princess to the Spanish colonial process in which native inhabitants of the Islands are forced to learn the *María Clara* dance. All of these characters try to make sense of the changing history. The Muslim Princess laughs at the Spanish colonizers, but these, in turn, have left a long-lasting imprint with their dance, and by enforcing a whole new lifestyle. The performers have learned the new rules of seduction, they also cover their bodies, they dress differently, and they dance to the same steps. This, however, is still challenged in the show by some dancers who do not follow the right steps of the traditional folk dance.

In the second part of the show, the *Mompou Suite*, those characters have to make sense of their own history. Situated in the present time, in which cell phones and television screens are all around, the performers are aware of the historical journey they have been through, but they do not understand it. In the piece, at points they dance to the same steps, mimicking others, but they quickly follow their own rhythms. They dance to the music of Spanish composer Mompou, but there are times when they dance to silence, as if following their own internal music. Patrick’s piece presents a set of characters that come from a similar historical path, but cannot make sense of their own selves. At points in the performance, they dance together in small groups, only to change again and follow their own path. They shake and fall, they jump high as if trying to reach the sky, they fight, and they are verbally mean to each other as well as themselves, only to merge in the group again. This is how the performers make sense of their history and the current times in which they live, and they show it to the audience. According to Patrick, this is one of the most important features of the show, as

Love, Death, and Mompou offered an unusual way to make an academic, physically embodied response to a past and present situation. It gave the choreographer/researchers an opportunity to engage with the debate on colonialism within the academy and in the wider public sphere. (Patrick, Interview)

This research work achieved this transfer of knowledge, not only in these two spheres, but also within the institutional systems that funded it. In this context, the academic work becomes not only a powerful postcolonial tool as a source of debate and criticism of Spanish influence on Filipino culture, but also a clear statement of resistance against certain foreign “hegemonic” practices. And it achieves this by producing new embodied narratives (endowed with a range of new meanings) undercutting language, and, therefore, becoming a powerful means of reaching out to a wider audience.

CONCLUSIONS

As producers of “hegemonic” practices, Spanish cultural institutions in Manila can be described as adopting several roles or positions; such as foreign diplomatic organizations promoting Spanish culture, cultural producers, achieving a position of relevance in the Manila cultural scene as funding bodies for local arts, and as critics that have gained the authority to set the rules of the artistic process. Through these positions, the Spanish cultural institutions are taking a stake in the process of validating and legitimizing what the arts should be in Manila.

It is not surprising that these actions were perceived by some Filipinos as “neo-colonialism,” and generated specific critiques of Spanish influence in the Philippine capital, such as the performance of *Love, Death, and Mompou*. This case study opens up several lines of research that have not been explored in either Philippine or Spanish cultural studies. One of these lines places an emphasis on the currency of Spanish influence in Manila and its consequences for the Filipino artistic community, as well as the direct criticism that these practices are receiving in a variety of formats.

If current Philippine postcolonial studies (in relation to the Spanish Empire) focus on the historical perspective, this research updates current scholarship, as much as it problematizes and discusses a situation that is very much in the present. The revision of *María Clara* in the practice-as-research work by Benildanze is an example of the currency of postcolonial criticism. This post-dramatic work managed to subvert not only the traditional cannon of the *María Clara Suite*,

but also the meaning of María Clara as a Philippine symbol. In the performance, the gentle character from the Rizal novel became a powerful, subversive statement against the very colonial power that underlies her origins. In this context, the new layers of signification acquired by María Clara make her become a renewed, empowered, and relevant figure for the 21st century.

Notes

1. A trailer for this show can be accessed online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoOl8NA8Trs_
2. The Instituto Cervantes is a cultural institution run by the Spanish Ministry of Culture. It promotes Spanish language and culture, and it has branches in more than forty countries. The Metro Manila branch is the oldest in Asia, opening its doors in the early 1990s.
3. For information about this program, please see www.spcc.ph
4. Jose Jay Cruz is one of the most prominent choreographers of contemporary dance in Manila. He is also a dancer and director of the Transitopia Contemporary Dance Commune (Manila).
5. Following Pierre Bourdieu's explanation of the concept of "habitus" as a "feel for the game" (77), I use the word "game" here as a useful way to discuss the relatively stable positions taken by the foreign cultural producers in Manila, and those local companies and individuals who receive and transform their input.
6. Both practitioners held those posts at Benildanze from 2005 to 2007, when Lapeña emigrated to Canada and Patrick to the UK.
7. Translated by the author from the original in Spanish as cited: Rizal, 1992, orig.1887.
8. *Rondalla* is an ensemble of string instruments, such as the laud, and the guitar, that are commonly played to accompany some folk dances in the Philippines; *Valses* is a Spanish and Tagalog word for waltzes; the *Mazurca* is a Spanish-inspired Filipino folk dance.
9. 'Sward' is slang for 'gay male' in the Philippines.
10. In this essay, Malou Jacob makes a contrast between the understanding of theater in the beginnings of the twenty first century, and other periods in which the genre of "Theater of Protest" was thriving. She mentions in particular the American Period (1899-1940), and the 1970s and '80s, which saw the staging of political plays by community groups such as PETA (Philippine Educational Theater Association) and Dulaang UP (based at the University of the Philippines).

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