

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

"Sound Come-Unity": Post-9/11 Brown and the Politics of Intercultural Improvisation

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1pb3108j>

Author

Panikker, Dhirendra Mikhail

Publication Date

2019

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

“Sound Come-Unity”: Post-9/11 Brown and the Politics of Intercultural Improvisation

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

Dhirendra Mikhail Panikker

September 2019

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson
Dr. Robin D.G. Kelley
Dr. René T.A. Lysloff
Dr. Liz Przybylski

Copyright by
Dhirendra Mikhail Panikker
2019

The Dissertation of Dhirendra Mikhail Panikker is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Acknowledgments

Writing can feel like a solitary pursuit. It is a form of intellectual labor that demands individual willpower and sheer mental grit. But like improvisation, it is also a fundamentally social act. Writing this dissertation has been a collaborative process emerging through countless interactions across musical, academic, and familial circles. This work exceeds my role as individual author. It is the creative product of many voices.

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Professor Deborah Wong. I can't possibly express how much she has done for me. Deborah has helped deepen my critical and ethnographic chops through thoughtful guidance and collaborative study. She models the kind of engaged and political work we all should be doing as scholars. But it all of the unseen moments of selfless labor that defines her commitment as a mentor: countless letters of recommendations, conference paper coachings, last minute grant reminders. Deborah's voice can be found across every page.

I am indebted to the musicians without whom my dissertation would not be possible. Priya Gopal, Vijay Iyer, Amir ElSaffar, and Hafez Modirzadeh gave so much of their time and energy to this project. They invited me into their musical and personal worlds. Their encouragement, patience, and support throughout the research and writing process was invaluable. I don't consider them "subjects" or interlocutors, but friends, colleagues, and fellow artists on similar creative and scholarly paths. Countless other musicians deserve my heartfelt recognition: Rajna Swaminathan, Zafer Tawil, George Ziadeh, Nasheet Waits, Francis Wong, John-Carlos Perea, Ole Mathisen, Jon Jang, Aakash Mittal, Faraz Minooei, Sirvan Manhoobi, Royal Hartigan, Masaru Koga, Wadada

Leo Smith, Nitin Mitta, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Rez Abassi, Anjna Swaminathan, Meera Dugal, Arun Ramamurthy, Dillon Vado, Seth Rosner, Yulun Wang, and Kate Dumbleton.

I couldn't have asked for a better committee. Liz Przybylski was an important ally during my time at UCR. I am grateful for her critical feedback and listening ear, and all the dissertation "check-ups" that helped me stay focused throughout the writing process. René Lysloff's classes were some of the most memorable. His inquisitive mind and carefree spirit helped balance the seriousness and fun of it all. Robin D.G. Kelley is such a powerful voice in the history of black music and politics. His presence on my committee is truly humbling. I am thankful for our many meetings together. During one writing slump, I met with Robin to discuss my chapter on trumpeter Amir ElSaffar. "You're working too hard," he told me, suggesting that I shift my analysis to war-torn Iraq rather than the Afro Arab pre-histories he's written so eloquently about. His advice shifted the trajectory of the chapter and thrust of my entire dissertation.

I am grateful for the many friends and colleagues who provided insightful feedback or simply moral support during the natural ups and downs of writing: Lindsay Rapport, Alex Rodriguez, Soham Patel, Arathi Govind, Chinmayi Sirsi, Daniel Castro Pantoja, Kristen Hayashi, Alex Blue V, Jacob Wendt, Josh Brown, Neal Matherne, Mark Inchoco, Elizabeth Stela, and Andrea Decker. A special thanks to Max Williams for his critical feedback on chapter two and Kevin Sliwoski for reading countless chapter drafts and cover letters. Our frequent conversations during the home stretch kept me afloat and

inspired. Finally, I am grateful for Kristine Adamian, who helped keep all those cognitive distortions at bay.

I am thankful for having a supportive academic community. The UC Riverside music department has been my home away from home for the last five years. Several faculty members have been important to my development as a scholar: Jonathan Ritter, Leonora Saavedra, Rogerio Budasz, Walter Clark, and Susan Ossman. I am especially indebted to Hillary Jenks, who helped hone countless grant applications and chapter drafts. My dissertation is in many ways a product of her critical eyes and ears. I am also fortunate to have had many outside mentors willing to read my work, provide insightful feedback, or encouragement throughout the research process: Michael Dessen, Michael Heller, Tamara Roberts, Elliott Powell, Niko Higgins, George Lipsitz. Special thanks to Edward Piñuelas who helped develop my theory of brownvoice in chapter three.

My dissertation would not be possible without the support of several institutions. The Center for Ideas and Society funded a significant portion of my fieldwork through the Humanities Graduate Student Research Grant. I am also honored to have received a generous Dissertation Year Program award in fall 2018. Non-academic funding sustained the majority of this project. I am especially thankful for several fellowships through the Gluck Fellows Program for the Arts. These opportunities allowed me to share my research on jazz and world music to underrepresented kids from local schools across Riverside County. Finally, I want to thank the UCR music department for providing four solid years of work as a graduate TA. Juggling teaching and writing was challenging, but I am grateful to have had the chance to work with almost one thousand students from

across our diverse campus. I want to believe that our brief conversations about music and culture made some impact on how we all listen critically in the world.

Lastly, and most importantly, I am blessed with the support and love of family. It's been a tough road for me and by extension, the people closest to me. But they were always there with gentle support and sometimes a little tough love during the stresses of graduate life. Special thanks to Debby, Tomás, and Monica for opening up their homes to me during fieldwork. Thank you to my partner and best friend, Danielle. You always believed in me, even during those moments when I lost hope. *Ti amo per sempre*. Finally, I am so grateful to my parents for supporting my musical and academic paths from the very start. My dad has shaped this project in more ways that he might know. Our long conversations on music and metaphysics always kept me on my toes. Your brilliant mind and poetic heart breathe through every word. I love you all.

Dedication

For my grandmother, Sarojini Panikker

(1919-2018)

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Sound Come-Unity”: Post-9/11 Brown and the Politics of Intercultural Improvisation

by

Dhirendra Mikhail Panikker

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Music
University of California, Riverside, September 2019
Professor Deborah Wong, Chairperson

In the aftermath of 9/11, South Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans experienced heightened racial violence and discrimination that subsumed their differences in the monolithic image of the Brown Other. In response, many have forged new alliances based in a shared marginalization as people of color. Recent scholarship in ethnic studies highlights the racial and class tensions surrounding interminority coalition building, particularly in relation to blackness (Kun and Pulido 2013; N. T. Sharma 2010). Music also functions as a site for the construction of community across difference. Scholars of critical studies in improvisation (CSI) highlight the role that real-time performance plays in generating meaningful encounters across divergent social identities and histories (Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013; Stanyek 2004). Little research, however, explores the work of non-black, US-based improvisers of color.

I fill in this critical gap through an examination of intercultural improvisation in the post-9/11 era. Across a multi-sited research network from New York to Chicago, Los

Angeles, and San Francisco, I explore the impact of post-9/11 racial and gender politics on the performance, reception, and representation of South Asian American and Middle Eastern American jazz improvisers. I examine the lives of four interrelated musicians in the jazz and creative music scene: Vijay Iyer, Priya Gopal, Amir ElSaffar, and Hafez Modirzadeh. I position their work in broader collaborative contexts and in relation to discourses on race, interculturalism, and improvisation. I employ dialogic (Feld 2012) and autoethnographic (Anderson 2006; Reed-Danahay 1997) methodologies in order to situate my own identity as a South Asian American artist-scholar within these musical communities. I ask these questions: How do race and gender influence the way Brown artists are seen and heard? What are the tensions surrounding interminority encounters with blackness? How does improvisation offer a creative medium to articulate these marked identities and forge new spaces of community across difference? I argue that post-9/11 Brown jazz serves as a social vision and political strategy to negotiate the spatial, temporal, and cartographic ruptures of 9/11 through the fugitive break that constitutes blackness. My research provides a more nuanced understanding of the limits and possibilities surrounding South Asian American and Middle Eastern American music-making in an era of heightened white supremacy premised on the expendability of black and Brown bodies.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
DEDICATION	viii
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	ix
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	xi
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	xiii
LIST OF AUDIOVISUAL EXAMPLES	xv
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: POST-9/11 BROWN AND THE POLITICS OF INTERCULTURAL IMPROVISATION.....	1
POINTS OF ENTRY	1
RESEARCH FOCUS.....	7
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	16
IMPROVISING ETHNOGRAPHY	25
OVERVIEW	37
CHAPTER 2 A MOVEMENT IN RELATION: BLACK ABSENCE AND THE PROMISE OF AFRO-SOUTH ASIA.....	41
PRELIMINARY ENCOUNTERS	45
IMPROVISING (SOUTH) ASIAN AMERICA.....	54
BODIED BODIES: NEGOTIATING BROWN SPACE IN THE RACIALIZED STATE	62
BLACK ABSENCE AND THE POLITICS OF RADICAL CHIC	74
CONCLUSION: A MOVEMENT IN RELATION.....	87
CHAPTER 3 LISTENING BENEATH THE GRAIN: SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN PERFORMANCE AND THE (RE)PRODUCTION OF BROWNVOICE.....	94
CONSTRUCTING BROWNVOICE.....	97
BORN TO SPREAD MUSIC	107
SONIC AUTO-MIMICRY	114
SEEKING COMMUNION.....	131
CONCLUSION: TOWARD A “RADICAL LISTENING RELATIONS”	140

CHAPTER 4 CRISIS: ARAB AMERICAN IMPROVISATION AND THE POLITICS OF UN/BELONGING	145
“JUST ONE OF THE KIDS”	149
SHADOWS OF PALESTINE	163
CRISIS: SALVAGING CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE “LONG WAR”	172
TOWARD A SONIC GEOGRAPHY OF LIBERATION	189
CONCLUSION: “TIPPING POINT”	197
CHAPTER 5 “SOUND COME-UNITY”: INTERCULTURAL IMPROVISATION AS DECOLONIAL PEDAGOGY AND PRAXIS	201
IRANIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE POLITICS OF CHROMODALITY	206
LISTENING IN THE BREAK	220
IMPROVISASIANS!: TOWARD A DECOLONIAL PEDAGOGY AND PRAXIS.....	234
CONCLUSION	252
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION: TOWARD A LISTENING REPERTOIRE	255
APPENDIX I	268
WORKS CITED	270

List of Illustrations

Figure 2.1: Thums Up.....	65
Figure 2.2: Vijay Iyer Trio.....	73
Figure 2.3: Chiraag Bhakta flyers.....	80
Figure 2.4: Iyer with Tirtha and Mahanthappa.....	81
Figure 2.5: Iyer and Smith.....	90
Figure 3.1: Gopal with her brother and grandmother.....	110
Figure 3.2: Gopal with Sri Tukaram Ganapathi Maharaj.....	112
Figure 3.3: <i>Aikyam: Onnu</i> album cover art.....	130
Figure 3.4: Yalini Dream at BRM.....	134
Figure 3.5: <i>Aikyam</i> at BRM.....	135
Figure 4.1: Amir ElSaffar with his family in Oak Park.....	152
Figure 4.2: Amir ElSaffar with Clark Terry and the DePaul trumpet section.....	157
Figure 4.3: Zafer Tawil.....	164
Figure 4.4: George Ziadeh.....	169
Figure 4.5: Two Rivers at Jazz at the Maverick Series.....	182
Figure 4.6: <i>Crisis</i> album cover.....	185
Figure 4.7: Matana Roberts solo.....	193
Figure 5.1: “Makam Steps” lead sheet.....	223
Figure 5.2: Mahmoud Zoufonoun, Faraz Minooei, and Danny Kalanduyan.....	246

Note on Audiovisual Examples

Audio and video examples are labeled in sequential order corresponding to chapter number (media 3.1, media 3.2, etc.). They are preceded by the following icon:



Click on the icon for direct access to the audio/visual materials. You can also access the media using the following link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Gji8gVH6JJqEGhjBSZO4XgkyTQFRRp1>

List of Audiovisual Examples

Media 2.1: “My Son the Fanatic”	67
Media 2.2: Rio Negro II soundwalk	85
Media 3.1: “Bramarā”	136
Media 3.2: “Vāzhkai, En Rose”	138
Media 3.3: “Karunkuruvi”	143
Media 4.1: “Tipping Point” duo.....	197
Media 5.1: “Makam Steps” play-along.....	223
Media 5.2: “Native” flute and Zulu drums	228
Media 5.3: Sun House and taiko break	230
Media 5.4: SF State soundwalk	234
Media 5.5: “Fables of Faubus”	250
Media 5.6: “Reflections”	250
Media 5.7: “Naima”	252

Chapter 1

Introduction: Post-9/11 Brown and the Politics of Intercultural Improvisation

Points of Entry

I'll never forget where I was when the Twin Towers fell. On September 11, 2001, I commuted into Boston just like any other day. I got off the number one train at Dudley Square and walked down Mass Ave toward Boylston Street. I was heading into my morning class at Berklee College of Music where I had just entered as a jazz piano major. But the building was locked. A hand-written sign sat in the window, "No classes today." Confused, I took the T back to my apartment. Street cars and public spaces were vacant. People walked quickly and talked quietly. My mother called me later to tell me about the attack. She was worried about my safety; the hijackers had begun their journey from Boston Logan Airport earlier that day. I didn't yet understand the scale of the catastrophe in terms of both the immediate human toll and the two-decade reckoning that would impact the lives and deaths of so many Brown people.¹ People that look like me.

My engagement with the politics of race emerged much earlier. I grew up in New Milford, a picturesque colonial town in Northwestern Connecticut. The town was over 94% white by the year I left for college. I had some friends of color including an Afro-Dominican boy and two second generation Yemeni American brothers. But I was probably the only South Asian American kid in grade school; a speck of Brown in a sea

¹ My use of the term "Brown" refers to this emergent political identity formation. I use "brownness" to signify the process of racialization in which race is mapped onto particular bodies and sounds.

of white. In high school, I was one of two Indian American students at Canterbury, an elite prep school once attended by John F. Kennedy. I hid my difference in khaki pants and navy blue blazers with gold buttons.

For most of my life, I considered myself white. After my parents' divorce, I lived with my mom, an American of English, Scottish, and Irish descent with deep roots in Anglo-Saxon New England. Her family can be traced back to the time of the Mayflower. On weekends and summer breaks, I would often visit my grandmother's eighty-acre farm near Lake Waramaug, an idyllic summer respite for wealthy New Yorkers. I was certainly the only Brown kid at the country club where I would swim and play tennis. I still have a trophy with the name "Duran Larned" etched in faux gold; a reference to both my mother's maiden name and my mistranslated first name adopted out of reluctant assimilation.

Brown

A racial category forged through racialist ideologies and colonization...often reflect[ing] the intermediary hierarchical position of those who are neither Black nor (fully) white.

– Sharma (2015: 1)

My dad often jokes about how pale I looked when I arrived in California to visit him during school vacations, and how Brown I would become on my return—a physical byproduct of the heat but also a racial disposition constructed through a proximity to my immigrant father. My father wasn't the conventional model minority. He was born in the small, central Indian city of Indor around the time of independence from British colonial

rule. His father had moved from caste-ridden Southern India to join Gandhi's freedom movement two decades earlier. But coming of age in the 1960s, my dad pursued a different kind of emancipatory politics. Joining the countercultural movement, he spent his early twenties traveling throughout rural India and living in caves with local mystics—a curious inversion of the white hippie's journey to the east. Later, he worked as a migrant laborer on the island of Crete, where the local Grecians often called him "mavro," meaning "dark" or "black." After emigrating to the US with my mother in 1978, he worked as a journeyman carpenter where he recalls never meeting a single Indian in the trade. A brownness colored by the post-colonial pain of exilic loss.

I probably did feel white in my father's absence. But I was different. My dark hair and skin, and foreign-sounding name marked me as Other. On the bus, kids called me "coffee bean" and other racial slurs that I'd rather not repeat here. As a college student in Boston, I was chased down the street and punched in the face by a group of tough Irish kids who said I looked at them the wrong way. I'm not sure if it was because I was Brown or they thought I was gay. I don't mean to downplay my privilege. I've lived a fortunate life in a society that values, often naively, the discipline and intellect of my people, or at least that curated segment of doctors and lawyers that emerged on the US shores just after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. But in retrospect, these moments mark the racial ambiguities and mundane violence that defines the post-9/11 Brown experience.

Music would provide a space to bridge my split identities. I began classical piano lessons at eight years old, developing an intimate relationship with the instrument

through the quiet of solitary practice. But I was drawn to other sound worlds. I distinctly remember the excitement of playing the quasi-jazz compositions meant to infuse traditional lessons with something “jazzier.” The notated pieces, which I often passed off as my own, were nothing more than a bluesy melody played in triplet swung time over a cliché “Hit the Road Jack” bass line. Once I developed enough technique, my favorite pieces to play were the Scott Joplin ragtime tunes that were sprinkled throughout the classical piano compilation. They weren’t improvised. But they were an alternative to the rigidity of Common Practice Era classical music. Joplin’s syncopated melodies and creolized march time were my gateway into a distinctly black musical aesthetic.

In between playing Mozart and Joplin, I was listening to Nas and Tupac. Like many young South Asian Americans, black vernacular musics provided a powerful mode of identification and resistance, particularly during the wave of Brown peril in the mid-1990s. My absorption with hip hop poetics and politics was my sonic cushion from an increasingly anti-Brown world. At the same time, it reveals some fissures around a simplistic identification with blackness that plagues discourses on interracial politics. Despite my few friends of color, African Americans were scarce outside the urban pockets of Hartford and New Haven. This racial absence belies the power asymmetries inherent in the mediated consumption of blackness that defines a majority of South Asian American encounters with African American music and culture. A core thread in my dissertation explores both the racial and class tensions surrounding this interminority relation and the utopian potentials made possible by improvisation.

Improvisation

The readiness to remake things out of crisis—the responsibility to act creatively and in concert with others to reclaim a public commons under attack; not the answer, but the beginnings of site-specific strategies connecting the creative and the critical, embodying a social practice that negotiates stricture and potential.

–Fischlin and Porter (2016: 5)

I rediscovered jazz by accident. As an undeclared freshman at Northeastern University in Boston, I wandered into the music department in search of private piano lessons as a relaxing hobby. The classical piano teacher had a full studio. “You could try the jazz instructor,” one of the administrators told me. I reluctantly agreed. I began lessons with Jane Potter, a working jazz pianist who also taught at nearby Berklee College of Music, where I would continue my studies the following year. I was a blank palette. Potter gave me dubbed tapes of jazz piano greats from Thelonius Monk to Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans. I played them out, absorbing their foreign sound into my classical hands and ears. I became a music major later that semester. One day, I met with Bill Lowe, a legendary bass trombonist and tubaist with roots in the Black Arts Movement who was serving as jazz chair. “If you take jazz lessons, you have to be in the big band,” he told me. His large presence in that small dark office felt like an initiation, an ordainment that marked my entry into a radically new musical world.

My first year in the jazz band felt alien. As the only Brown musician in a mostly white band, I sat quietly behind a backup electric keyboard, watching and listening in earnest. Cornet player Taylor Ho Bynum was the interim band leader. Lowe and Bynum’s free jazz aesthetic led to an unconventional big band experience. I remember

opening one piece with a group “om,” our collective vibration echoing a lineage of global jazz artists such as John Coltrane to fusion-era appropriations of Indian spirituality. On another day, I played a nervous solo over an obscure Monk tune. I probably got lost and certainly didn’t hit the changes. But Bynum was enthusiastic by what he heard as a genuine “Monk-like” approach to silence. These black improvisatory practices would shape my own experience as a young Brown man coming of age in an era of racial crisis. The collective negotiation of time and tone cultivated new musical intimacies that mitigated the alienation of living in a post-9/11 world.

Interculturalism

The contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces between cultures, spaces that can function in performance as sites of negotiation.

—Knowles (2010: 4)

In 2002, I left college out of frustration with the cutthroat jazz education industry. With ample free time, I traveled to India for the first time since I was six months old—unlike many Indian immigrants, my father has a tenuous connection with his homeland. It felt good to be in a sea of Brown. I tried to blend in by wearing hand-made cotton kurtas and Indian sandals. I probably appeared more “Indian” than my cousins, who often looked to the West for new fashion and culture. But my foreign way of speaking and moving marked me as different. Like many multi-ethnic people, my ambiguous racial identity and hybrid cultural upbringing created an embodied feeling of un/belonging.

Inspired by the Hindustani artists I heard in Bombay, I returned to the US with a renewed interest in music. I studied *tabla* with the late Harihar Rao, a sitarist and

pedagogue who brought Indian music to the West through his work with the Hindustani Jazz Sextet. I also learned how to listen to Indian classical music in a more social setting through concerts in Los Angeles's South Asian diasporic community. As a Masters student at UC Irvine, I began studying South Indian music more seriously. I took lessons in *solkattu* and began collaborating with South Indian dancers and percussionists, situating these encounters in critical discourses on diaspora and interculturalism.² Jazz would become a creative space to fuse these disparate worlds. Inspired by pianist Vijay Iyer's work, I formed Trio Sangha, a jazz trio that combined South Indian musical systems in an improvised framework. *Sangha*, a Buddhist term denoting an assembly or community of spiritual practitioners, exemplified our connection as friends and artists in search of heightened awareness through collective real-time music making. Through this creative engagement with heritage, I began to understand, articulate, and claim my identity as a Brown artist-scholar within the fractured spaces of post-9/11 life.

Research Focus

The "autobiographic example," as Saidiya Hartman reminds us, "is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as examples of them." (Saunders 2008: 1). Thus, the preceding autoethnographic narrative is not an evocative reflection on the "author's" life. Rather, my unique personal journey reveals a small but

² *Solkattu* is a pedagogical method that uses mnemonic syllables and clapping gestures to learn complex rhythmic patterns.

critical window into the politics of race and improvisation in the post-9/11 era. I tell this story to “counter the violence of abstraction” (Ibid.).

My experience is embedded in the lives of many Others. In the aftermath of 9/11, South Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans experienced heightened racial violence and discrimination that subsumed their differences in the monolithic image of the Brown Other. In response, many have forged new alliances based in a shared marginalization as people of color. Recent scholarship in ethnic studies highlights the racial and class tensions surrounding interminority coalition building, particularly in relation to blackness (Kun and Pulido 2013; N. T. Sharma 2010). Music also functions as a site for the construction of community across difference. Scholars of critical studies in improvisation (CSI) highlight the role that real-time performance plays in generating meaningful encounters across divergent social identities and histories (Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013; Stanyek 2004). Little research, however, explores the work of non-black, US-based improvisers of color.

I fill in this critical gap through an examination of intercultural improvisation in the post-9/11 era. Across a multi-sited research network from New York to Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, I explore the impact of post-9/11 racial and gender politics on the performance, reception, and representation of South Asian American and Middle Eastern American jazz improvisers. I examine the lives of four interrelated musicians in the jazz and creative music scene: Vijay Iyer, Priya Gopal,³ Amir ElSaffar, and Hafez

³ “Priya Gopal” is a pseudonym for the actual singer. For personal and professional reasons, she has asked me to remove her real name to preserve anonymity.

Modirzadeh. I position their work in broader collaborative contexts and in relation to discourses on race, interculturalism, and improvisation. I employ dialogic (Feld 2012) and autoethnographic (Anderson 2006; Reed-Danahay 1997) methodologies in order to situate my own identity as a South Asian American artist-scholar within these musical communities. I ask these questions: How do race and gender influence the way Brown artists are seen and heard? What are the tensions surrounding interminority encounters with blackness? How does improvisation offer a creative medium to articulate these marked identities and forge new spaces of community across difference? I argue that post-9/11 Brown jazz serves as a social vision and political strategy to negotiate the spatial, temporal, and cartographic ruptures of 9/11 through the fugitive break that constitutes blackness. My research provides a more nuanced understanding of the limits and possibilities surrounding South Asian American and Middle Eastern American music-making in an era of heightened white supremacy premised on the expendability of black and Brown bodies.

9/11 signifies a critical turning point for the Brown subject. The War on Terror would begin a decade and a half pattern of state-sanctioned violence across South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.⁴ The Patriot Act and other anti-terrorist measures led to increased surveillance, racial profiling, border militarism, illegal detention, and torture.

⁴ This racialized violence emerged much earlier. In the 1970s and 1980s, Arab Americans faced heightened racial discrimination and violence, particularly during the Iranian Hostage Crisis and the first Gulf War. In 1987, the hate group known as the “dotbusters” targeted Indian American communities in Jersey City. Nativist fears of “Brown peril” would increase throughout the 1990s. Regressive immigration reforms and hate crimes reinforced stereotypes of Brown Others only desirable for their labor. The non-immigrant temporary worker program (H-1B), meant to stimulate demand for technological production in the Gulf Coast and Silicon Valley, often divided families through strict limits on long-term migration (D. Iyer 2015; Prashad 2000).

In the US, diverse communities of color experienced heightened racial violence and profiling that subsumed their differences into the image of what Junaid Rana calls the “Muslim,” a conflation of the terrorist and immigrant born out of neoliberal economic policy (2011: 9). In the first few weeks after 9/11, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), a non-profit immigrant rights organization, recorded over six hundred cases of discrimination and violence against Arab, South Asian, Muslim, and Sikh communities. Workplace and educational discrimination continued throughout the early 2000s, with a rise in hate crimes near the anniversary of 9/11. This assault on Brown bodies has become increasingly global. In 2012, a white supremacist with neo-Nazi ties killed six Sikh worshippers at the *gurdwara* in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. And as I write this, fifty Muslims from across the Arab world were murdered at the Christchurch mosque in New Zealand. This historical genealogy of corporeal violence reveals the increased racial expendability of Brown in the aftermath of 9/11.

But we must be wary of positioning 9/11 as a singular moment of catastrophe. Rather, as Martin Daughtry argues, the “post-9/11 world” should be seen as “conditional, not a reified boundary but a useful rhetorical conceit” (2012: xxv). For Kevin W. Moore, the casting of 9/11 as a “watershed event of world-historical importance” only elevates the status of the US as “the epicenter of global transformation” (2002: 1). And yet, 9/11 signifies a historic shift in national and global political configurations. Sven Chek describes 9/11 as a temporal and spatial rupture marked by a “territorial shift from national to world presence, brought about by an intrusion of a radical otherness into the

national body politic” (2011: 109). This radical break marks a crisis in the lived experience of the South Asian and Middle Eastern subject; both a rupture from a coherent and stable past and an exclusion from a white civic space construed as “one without Brown” (N. T. Sharma 2010: 185). At the same time, it marks a temporal rupture from a precarious future marked by potential erasure. In short, the marker of 9/11 suggests an imminent breach in the subjective and cartographic presence/absence of Brown.

In response, many have forged new political alliances as people of color. Following 9/11, activists and civil rights leaders called for alternative identity formations attuned to shared histories of marginalization. These include various interethnic and interfaith rubrics such as “MENA (Middle Eastern and North African), “MASA” (Muslim, Arab, and South Asian) and “AMEMSA” (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian)—a term that gained traction throughout the Bay Area in the early 2000s.⁵ Indeed, these broad configurations risk obscuring difference through a conflation of race, ethnicity, and religion. The elision of black Muslims also reveals enduring forms of anti-blackness within South Asian and Arab American communities. But as Maya Berry, executive director of the Arab American Institute argues, these categories represent a “natural alliance” that references a “constituency and solidarity that is different from other communities because of the 9/11 experiences that connect Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, and South Asians” (2015: 99). Unsettling conventional identity categories, these emergent political formations suggest new models of affiliation—however contested and

⁵ Other categories include “SWANA” (South West Asia and North Africa) and AMSA (Arab, Muslim, and South Asian). For more on post-9/11 racial formations, see Iyer (2017).

shaped by difference—that speak to the shared struggles of diverse Brown communities caught in the “catastrophic rupture” of 9/11 and its violent aftermath.⁶

These new frameworks represent what Nitasha Sharma calls “post-9/11 Brown,” a “political and diasporic identity amongst people across the globe in response to the Wars on Terror and changing U.S.-Middle East relations” (2015: 19). For Sharma, the post-9/11 Brown formation is most visible in the realm of black music. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, disenchanted Brown youth turned to hip hop to articulate their diasporic identities and critique US racial and imperial regimes. Post-9/11 Brown thus represents an “expression of brownness as a political concept and identity in the 21st century” expressed through “hip hop music that discusses surveillance and oppression that links Arabs, South Asians, North Africans, and Muslims—and those mistaken for them—in their homelands and across diasporas” (Ibid.). Post-9/11 Brown opens a critical space between the black/white racial binary while expanding an Asian American identity formation defined by East Asianness.⁷ In doing so, this framework helps map new relationalities between differentially racialized bodies through music, particularly in relation to blackness. Little work, however, explores the role of post-9/11 Brown in African American improvisatory contexts.

Improvisation is fundamental to black music and social life. More than a static aesthetic, improvisation serves as a creative mode of black being-in-the-world. The

⁶ There has been considerable state opposition to these new racial categories. In early 2018, the US Census Bureau denied the decade-long push to include the MENA category on the 2020 census.

⁷ While outside the scope of my dissertation, this framework also draws Latinx and Filipina/o Americans into greater configuration through shared experiences of marginalization as people of color. For more on constructions of Brown amongst Latinx communities, see Muñoz (2000).

ability to act collectively and in real-time within systems of power and difference provides a powerful model of social and political change. Improvisation also serves as mode of fugitive sociality inherent to the black radical tradition, Cedric Robinson's (2005) term for a uniquely black political, aesthetic, and intellectual project operating outside Western analytic ontologies. For Fred Moten, the black radical tradition represents a site of "rupture and collision," a movement in the "not-in-between," marked by both a presence and loss of Africa encoded in improvisatory song (2017: 10). This alternative black sociality is situated in the hold, the physical and metaphorical space of containment that Christina Sharpe describes as the prison, the migrant ship, and the "womb that produces blackness" (2016: 27). What does it mean then for the post-9/11 Brown subject to occupy this space of black rupture and collision? What are the tensions surrounding this tenuous interracial formation? What new modes of relation might emerge and how might they offer new ways of hearing and imagining the Brown Other?

I answer these questions through an examination of four musicians: Vijay Iyer, Priya Gopal, Amir ElSaffar, and Hafez Modirzadeh.⁸ I focus on these artists out of a personal love of their music and an interest in what their unique stories tell us about the politics of intercultural improvisation in post-9/11 jazz. All four musicians are linked through existing personal networks, musical scenes, and institutions. With the exception of Modirzadeh, they are all involved in New York's creative music scene, a loose

⁸ My focus on individual musicians is inspired by several artist-centered jazz studies (Feld 2012a; Kelley 2012; Spellman 1966; Locke 1999). These scholars use biography, oral history, and ethnography to challenge hagiographic readings plaguing jazz historiography.

constellation of improviser-composers who challenge mainstream jazz aesthetics through experimentation and intercultural collaboration.⁹ Iyer and Modirzadeh have been connected to Asian Improv aRts (AIR), a Bay Area music collective committed to Asian American music and politics since the late 1980s.¹⁰ Both the creative scene and AIR trace their lineage to the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a Chicago-based collective that created new artistic and economic frameworks for black musicians in the late 1960s. Finally, these artists have all been committed to intercultural music making through a deep engagement with their ancestral heritage within jazz improvisational forms, thus building on histories of Afro Asian affiliation that began a half-century earlier.¹¹ My focus on their work demands a historicization of the critical links between post-1945 and post-9/11 musical and political life.¹²

⁹ The term “creative music” emerges from a historical lineage of black composer-improvisers committed to musical experimentalism and alternative community building in a transcultural framework. For more on the creative music scene, see Scherbenske (2014).

¹⁰ Several scholars have written about AIR in the context of Asian American identity and Afro-Asian politics (Asai 2005; Dessen 2006; Kajikawa 2012; Wong 2004). I outline their work in more detail in chapter five.

¹¹ The 1950s and 1960s were key moments in a growing exchange between black America, India, and the Arab world. The connection between black civil rights and the anticolonial movements across Africa and Asia generated a global Third World Solidarity between people of color. Within this context, artists such as Ahmed Abdul-Malik and John Coltrane began engaging with North African, Indian, and Middle Eastern musics, often through face-to-face collaboration. While sometimes dabbling in “afro-orientalism,” these artists challenged cliché depictions of the east saturating post-WWII popular culture. They also developed new musical systems that allowed musicians to engage more freely in non-Western idioms. I address these critical pre-histories in more detail within each chapter. For more on Afro Asia in the context of Third World Solidarity, see (Ho and Mullen 2008; Raphael-Hernandez and Steen 2006), music (Wong 2004; Hisama 2005; Clements 2005), and South Asia (Prashad 2000; 2001; Slate 2012).

¹² As Jason Stanyek has written, the period following 1945 reflects a critical restructuring of herrenvolk democracy characterized by shifts in the “politics of co-presence,” an intercorporeal aesthetic shaping interethnic and interracial encounters (2004: 31-32). This stimulated forms of intercultural encounter central to my examination of post-9/11 jazz.

These four improvisers reveal both the look and sound of the post-9/11 Brown formation. They are all “Brown,” although their relationship to race is fluid and highly contested. Modirzadeh and ElSaffar’s multi-ethnic Middle Eastern American upbringing reveals a broader picture of identity formation that unsettles a narrow focus on South Asianness. And yet, all of these musicians occupy a US jazz space. This places them in a unique position in relation to blackness, an interracial confluence at the core of my dissertation.¹³ These encounters are also inherently gendered. Three of the four musicians are male instrumentalists. This grants them mobility in a contemporary jazz scene defined by heteronormative masculinities. Gopal’s story as a female South Asian American vocalist reveals the limits of inclusion while making visible the jazz world’s hypermasculine construction. Despite these differences, all four artists have considerable class privilege. Three of them come from middle to upper-middle class families, several of whom emigrated to the US after 1965. Access to prestigious grants and advanced degrees in higher education affords significant cultural capital. Their role as artist-scholars also provides ownership over the intellectual discourse in ways that other immigrant communities have historically been denied. This entanglement of race, gender, and class bind these disparate case studies. Such an intersectional inquiry requires a grounding in several interdisciplinary conversations around music and difference.

¹³ Black-Brown encounters are relevant to my work. Scholars have examined encounters between African American and Latinx communities in various urban contexts (Kun and Pulido 2013; Márquez 2013; Pulido 2006). I am inspired by Gaye Theresa Johnson’s work on Afro-Chicano/a solidarities in post-war Los Angeles. Johnson theorizes “spatial entitlements,” or how “marginalized communities have created new collectives based...on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces” (2013: x). This framework provides a useful tool for mapping South Asian/Middle Eastern musical spaces. And yet, the Afro Asian nature of their work requires a distinct analytic of race and class difference.

Literature Review

Several discourses animate this inquiry: race, interculturalism, improvisation. I conceive of race as a social construct based in hierarchical systems of power and difference (Omi and Winant 2014).¹⁴ I adopt the rubric of “post-9/11 Brown” (N. T. Sharma 2016) or a “global political identification across religious, national, and racial borders” to describe a particular constellation of racialized artists and collectives. In analyzing their work, I utilize the framework of “interculturalism,” or the strategies used to “articulate intercorporeal relationships across various kinds of socially constructed identities” (Stanyek 2004: 6). Improvisation serves as both critical theory and method. I conceive of improvisation as an intersubjective process of real-time music making based in an “ethic of co-creation” (Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013). These interrelated frameworks constitute a relational ontology that prioritizes the linkages between racialized bodies and sounds over discreet identities and subject positions. By placing these disparate discourses in conversation, I seek to understand the role that intercultural improvisation might have in reimagining the post-9/11 Brown subject in US social and political life.

Constructing Brown

A body of work examines the racialized construction of South Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans. Vijay Prashad (2000; 2001; 2012) examines how histories of

¹⁴ I build on Omi and Winant’s concept of “racial formations, or “sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (2014: 109). Racial formations are enacted through what they call “racial projects,” or the “interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular lines” (ibid.: 125). Race can be thus seen as a dialogic process, shaped by existing social structures.

colonialism and orientalism have shaped the way South Asian Americans have been perceived in the US racial imagination. Prashad pays close attention to the relational construction of Brown within existing racial hierarchies.¹⁵ A parallel strain of work examines how immigration laws and legal cases have influenced racial categorizations and identifications amongst Arab Americans, particularly in relation to whiteness (Jamal 2008; Cainkar 2006; Tehranian 2008; Maghbouleh 2017). As a whole, this work highlights the precarious location of both South Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans within the black/white racial binary. C.J Kim's (1999) concept of "racial triangulation" is useful for understanding these critical tensions. Kim argues that Asian Americans have been historically triangulated within a dialectic hierarchy of black and white. The dominant "White group" thus valorizes a subordinate "Asian American group" relative to an inferior "Black group." Asian Americans are in turn marked as foreign compared to insider black and white communities through forms of "civic ostracism" (107-108). I build on Kim's formulation, examining the doubly triangulated role of Brown within US racial hierarchies. I argue that South Asian Americans, and Middle Eastern Americans to some extent, are positioned within a complex black/white dialectic; valorized in relation to blackness and yet subordinated to both white and (East) Asian Americans through violent forms of "civic ostracism."¹⁶ In doing so, I problematize ethnicity as constituent of Asian American identity formation in post-9/11 political life.

¹⁵ For more on South Asian Americans and the black/white racial binary, see Davé (2013).

¹⁶ I am wary of positioning African Americans as "insiders," a move that elides the structural position of blackness. I draw on recent Afro-pessimist discourses (Sexton 2010; Wilderson III 2010) that conceive of US racial dynamics not as a black/white binary, but an overarching black/non-black dialectic. I expand on

A significant body of work addresses the influence of 9/11 on racial and identity formation. Emerging in the early 2000s, this research examines the impact Islamophobia and the War and Terror have had on South Asian, Arab, North African, and Middle Eastern communities in both US and transnational contexts. Scholars address a range of issues including identity and belonging (De 2016), race and representation (Alsultany 2012; Davé 2013), raced and gendered labor (Rana 2011), queer biopolitics (Puar 2007), and coalitional politics (Iyer 2017; Maira 2016; Naber 2012). Studies of music in the post-9/11 world (Ritter and Daughtery 2012), and in relation to hip hop (Maira 2008; 2013; Nair and Balaji 2008; N. T. Sharma 2010; 2016) are particularly salient to my research. This work highlights the role that black music plays in Brown subject formation. It also highlights new forms of interminority community that challenges US imperial and racial regimes. This work is useful in my analysis of post-9/11 surveillance (chapter two) and Arab diasporic critiques of empire (chapter four). At the same time, my focus on improvisation intervenes in these discourses through an examination of the limits of community and oppositional politics in African American idioms.

Attention to the racialization of sound is critical for mapping these musical and political configurations. Tamara Roberts theorizes the concept of “sono-racialization,” or the “organization of sound into taxonomies based on racialized conceptions of bodies” (2016: 4). Roberts also describes forms of “sono-racial collaboration,” or “intentional engagements in which artists employ racialized sound in order to perform interracial

this critique in chapter two by examining the limits of Afro Asia as an interracial rubric. For more on the pitfalls of Afro Asia, see Tiongson (2015).

rapport” (ibid.: 6). This framework helps us understand how racialized sounds are both constructed and contested by performers, a useful model for mapping Afro South Asian collaboration without falling into the traps of racial determinism. Another body of work examines how race and gender are constructed through listening, particularly concerning black music and world music (Kheshti 2015; Stoever 2016).¹⁷ These conceptual frameworks reveal how race and gender are more than social constructs, but audible forces actively negotiated through both performers and listeners. I build on this work by examining how difference is mediated through intercultural sounds and listening bodies. Intercultural practices provide a unique opportunity to understand the racialization of sound given their reliance on musical multiplicity and “sono-racial” practices across intersecting forms of difference.

Mapping the Interculture

The roots of interculturalism in the West can be traced to the colonial encounter with the Other. During the 1970s and 1980s, scholars in performance studies and theatre began theorizing intercultural practices. Building on Victor Turner’s work on theatre and ritual (1990), this literature highlights the utopian potential of intercultural collaboration based in the universal exchange of theatrical forms (Pavis 1996; Schechner 1982; Turner 1990; Schechner and Appel 1990). Richard Schechner describes borrowing as a natural element of the human species based in “cultures of choice,” or the free incorporation of cultures of birth and the Other, “so that ‘them’ and ‘us’ is elided” (1982: 3-4). These discourses

¹⁷ A parallel strain of scholarship explores the racialization of the voice in relation to both blackness (Barrett 1999; Eidsheim 2008) and brownness (Davé 2013). I engage with this literature in chapter three.

reflect a blind universalism based in narrow east/west binaries that in the desire for free exchange ultimately perpetuate Western hegemony. In the 1990s, postcolonial theatre scholars intervened by highlighting issues of power and difference while asserting the agency of subaltern communities (Bharucha 1996).¹⁸

Mark Slobin and George Lipsitz find an intercultural middle ground in the realm of popular music. Drawing on Paul Gilroy's (1993) notion of "diasporic intimacy," Lipsitz examines the limits and possibilities of intercultural exchange amongst "aggrieved communities." Attention to the ethics of appropriation is nuanced through analyses of musical borrowings grounded in "strategic anti-essentialism" (1994: 62–63). Mark Slobin shifts our attention to "micromusics" of the US, or "small units within big music cultures" (Slobin 1993: 11). He posits three intercultural typologies: "industrial," or the "creature of the commodified music system;" "diasporic," or "linkages that subcultures setup across national boundaries," and "affinity," or "face to face, mouth to ear" exchanges. (ibid.: 61-68).¹⁹ Challenging reductive east/west, black/white binaries, these discourses provide useful models for examining intercultural exchanges amongst the "micromusical" communities that constitute post-9/11 Brown space.²⁰

¹⁸ For more on postcolonial theatre, see Fusco (1994), Tan (2012), and Knowles (2010).

¹⁹ Ethnomusicologists and popular music scholars have addressed issues of interculturalism in the context of global pop and World Beat encounters (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; Erlmann 1999; Feld 2000; Meintjes 1990; Middleton and Beebe 2002; Taylor 1997).

²⁰ This work has been critiqued for an uncritical celebration of hybridity and subaltern performance that ignores issues of power and difference (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; Erlmann 1993; 1999).

Jason Stanyek provides the most cogent theoretical analysis of intercultural performance. Building on Slobin’s musical typologies, Stanyek differentiates interculturalism from multiculturalism and cross-culturalism, that he argues both “cloak the persistence of racial and ethnic violence and hierarchy in a gauzy, celebratory scrim” (2004: 6). Rather, interculturalism serves as a “series of diffuse organizational strategies, built upon taxonomies of difference, that musicians and performers use to articulate intercorporeal relationship across various kinds of socially constructed identities” (ibid.: 1). Interculturalism thus represents a “somatic aesthetic,” one that “gives organization emphasis to the co-presence of differentially situated bodies” (ibid.: 1).²¹ This conceptual framework provides a useful way to analyze intercultural encounters within systems of power—a useful corrective to celebratory “resistance” scholarship. It also draws attention to the embodied qualities central to Afro-diasporic music. I build on Stanyek’s model through an examination of the intercultural strategies employed by the post-9/11 Brown performer, whose position within black improvisatory fields requires an analytic attentive to intercorporeal exchanges across multiple taxonomies of difference.

Locating Improvisation

In one sense, improvisation is universal. It is found in almost every musical tradition although its application, value, and conceptions of what constitutes improvisation remain culturally relative. Despite this ubiquity, few studies have examined improvisation’s

²¹ Stanyek borrows the term “somatic aesthetic” from David Palumbo-Liu’s examination of embodied Asian American formations (1999: 9). For more on theorizing intercultural improvisation, see Stanyek (1999, 2004b) and Wren (2014).

fundamental role in musical life. A small body of interdisciplinary work explores the social nature of improvisation across various cultural contexts (Nettl 1974; Nettl and Russell 1998; Solis and Nettl 2009). For Gabriel Solis, such a comparative approach “might lead us not to forsake the study of works and the various canons of the music we study, but to put such study in its place, as one portion of larger, living musical traditions” (2009: 9). But as Vijay Iyer argues, we must be wary of ethnomusicological treatments of improvisation as a “decorative ‘feature’ of various non-Western musics and as a source of essentializing difference.” Such assumptions, he argues, lead to a “persistent elision of Blackness” through a “facile equation with other incommensurate ‘cases’” (2014). Following Iyer, I adopt a more localized view of improvisation as a dialogic mode of real-time creation grounded in African American creative histories, while remaining attentive to the rifts and potentials of interculturality.

I build on an emergent body of literature in critical studies in improvisation (CSI).²² Growing out of the Canadian ICASP and IICSI research institutes, CSI has produced dozens of co-authored texts, an open-access journal, several annual festivals and colloquiums.²³ The recent two-volume Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies (Lewis and Piekut 2016a; 2016b) solidifies the field’s scholarly presence. This

²² My focus on African American forms of improvisation intersects with a wide range of scholarship on jazz. Scholarship relevant to my research include race and gender (Tucker 2000; Rustin and Tucker 2008; Rustin-Paschal 2017; Porter 2002); global jazz (Atkins 2001; 2003; Braggs 2016; Feld 2012a; Muller and Benjamin 2011) and; ethnographies of jazz in the US (Berliner 1994; T. A. Jackson 2012; Monson 1996). Ethnomusicological research on jazz is scarce and often ignores non-black artists of color.

²³ My ideas on improvisation have been shaped through several presentations at IICSI colloquium, including a week-long conference on intercultural improvisation at Memorial University in July 2016.

interdisciplinary body of work highlights the role of improvisation as a locus for social interaction and the cultivation of new social and political identities. CSI scholars define improvisation as a collaborative real-time process and alternative form of community building emerging from aggrieved communities (Heble 2000; Fischlin and Heble 2004; Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013; Heble and Wallace 2013; Siddall and Waterman 2016).²⁴ Wary of the commodified and classical, CSI scholars construe improvisation as a fundamentally resistant practice grounded in African American creative music histories that challenge hegemonic and hierarchical forms of artistic practice. As Fischlin and Heble argue, improvisation is not a stable, coherent category, but a process located on “the other side of nowhere,” the “mysterious horizon beyond where the potential for thinking alternatives—whether musical, social, communitarian, theoretical, and so forth—is activated as a generative principle of seeking out contrarian knowledges, dissonant social practices, and transgressive uncertainties” (2004: 10). This framework provides a critical tool for mapping the work of South Asian American and Middle Eastern American jazz improvisers, who seek similar contrarian knowledges and disruptive practices against a backdrop of social and political dislocation.

CSI has been rightfully critiqued for an overly utopian valorization of real-time music making (Stanbridge 2008). Scott Currie points to the field’s investment in “transatlantic free improvisation,” an assumed democratic and universalizing trope that

²⁴ A sub-strain of literature on improvisation and pedagogy is relevant to my study of improvisation in the academy, discussed in more detail in chapter five (Heble and Laver 2016; Heble and Waterman 2008; Lewis 2007).

imposes the “value structure of Western ideal-type onto non-Western practices premised upon quite different socio-aesthetic commitments” (2016: 1-2).²⁵ Indeed, all of the improvisers in my dissertation locate themselves in a genealogy of black radicalism. At the same time, they expand narrow “transatlantic” aesthetic and value systems through their position as Brown artists at the nexus of Afro Asian musical geographies. Following Currie’s call for a reflexive analysis of power relations, I intervene in these discourses through a more ethnographic examination of the limits and potentials of improvised practice in a pan-transatlantic/pacific context. In doing so, I join recent conversations around issues of intercultural difference (Waterman 2016) and gender in Asian America (Wong 2016).²⁶

I remain hopeful in improvisation as a tool for mapping ethical social relations. I follow what Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz describe as an improvisational “ethics of co-creation.” As they argue, “improvisation is an important social, musical, and ethical practice for understanding and generating the potential forms of cocreation—deeply relational, profoundly contingent—without which our collective relation to each other and all things would be unthinkable” (2013: xi-xii). An “ethics of co-creation” also serves as a metonym for collaborative authorship that strives to “create something that would not have otherwise been possible” (ibid.: xii). A critical theory of improvisation requires

²⁵ For more on the limits of intercultural improvisation, see Lewis (2004) and Dessen (2004).

²⁶ Both of these critical essays are part of the recent collection, *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity* (Siddall and Waterman 2016). This work construes improvisation as a site of both the liberatory and precarious. Attention to issues of identity and difference (race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability, etc.) represent critical interventions in the field.

a decolonial methodology that reconsiders the fundamental relationship between self and Other.

Improvising Ethnography

Like improvisation, ethnography is a dialogic practice with real ethical stakes. Our encounters with the communities we study are messy. We make mistakes, we misrepresent people and events. And yet our “subjects” become more than just interlocutors or points of data. We become friends. We make music together. We co-produce knowledge about sound and its myriad meanings. I propose an improvisational methodology that attends to the conditional nature of ethnographic research and writing in hopes of a more ethical engagement with the politics of representation. This includes: 1) multi-sited “ethnomusicology at home;” 2) collaborative autoethnography of performance; and 3) dialogic research and writing. These interrelated approaches comprise a relational methodology that unsettles colonial binaries of self/Other, field/home, theory/praxis. In doing so, I follow Chávez and Skelchy’s call for a “decolonial ethnomusicology” that “de-centers the position of researchers as all-knowing specialists in a particular music culture and changes the balance of power” (2016: 2).

Multi-Sited “Ethnomusicology at Home”

In the late 1980s, anthropologists called into question the construction of “field” and “home” in response to the crisis of representation. The rise of urban anthropology and a growing awareness of globalization and the multiplicity of modern identities forced scholars to rethink the conventional twelve-month research approach and the artificial

distinction between “home” and “host” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Visweswaran 1994). For Marcus and Fischer, this turn entailed a “cultural critique at home” based in a “sophisticated reflection by the anthropologist about herself and her own society” (1986: 4). This inspired ethnomusicological studies of North American popular musics ignored in canonical histories (Berger 1999; Keyes 2002; Slobin 1993). In-depth accounts of contemporary jazz in the US are particularly relevant to my work (Berliner 1994; Monson 1996). These approaches encompass what Bruno Nettl describes as an “ethnomusicology at home,” that “suggests looking literally in one’s own backyard, investigating, as an ethnomusicologist, one’s own culture” (2015: 186), whatever “one’s culture” might consist of in all its multiplicity.

An ethnomusicology at home demands a flexible multi-sited approach. This methodology unsettles the territorially-bounded nature of conventional fieldwork by focusing on networks of interconnection constitutive of global modernity. I follow what Hugh Gusterson describes as “polymorphous engagements,” that moves away from traditional participant-observation by “interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form” (1997: 116). My fieldwork traversed an urban network from New York to Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. These cities form central nodes in a broader network of artists and audiences across multiple scenes and performance locations. Research occurred in various performance sites from concert halls to jazz clubs, rehearsal studios, public festivals, and local cultural centers. These interlinked spaces represent what Mary Louis Pratt describes as “contact zones,” or “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and

grapple with each other” (1991: 34). In navigating these disparate sites, I employ what Anna Tsing describes as multi-local “patchwork fieldwork,” that “engages with multiple communities and discourses, patching forms of knowledge across space and time” (2005: x). My main research occurred between June 2016 and June 2018, but the blurring of home and host meant that fieldwork often took place beyond the bounds of a static fieldwork period.²⁷ Rather than a typical one-year abroad, I took shorter trips, often between two and four weeks, to attend concerts and conduct interviews. In doing so, I engaged with disparate musicians, communities, institutions, and discourses, “patching” together various forms of knowledge in keeping with the deeply situated yet translocal nature of improvisation.

A patchwork approach generated multiple forms of ethnographic knowledge. In one case, I traveled via bus from New York to Boston to hear mridangam player Rajna Swaminthan perform during a last-minute concert at MIT. On the way back, I happened to take the bus back with violinist Arun Ramamurthy. The improvised encounter allowed me to explore the embodied nature of Brown creative labor in a more fluid “contact zone.” Meeting with musicians in different locations revealed artists’ work in the world in ways that a conventional single-sited ethnography often ignores. For example, I met Amir ElSaffar in various public and private spaces; his home in Fort Bragg, New York; Alwan for the Arts, an Arab American community center in lower Manhattan; and the

²⁷ This research began much earlier. Between 2008-2010, I conducted fieldwork on South Asian American jazz in New York City for my MFA thesis (2010). This included personal interviews, participant-observation at live performances, and private music lessons in Indian percussion. Given my experience as a South Asian American improviser, it also might be said that my research began even earlier and extends beyond this document’s permanent form.

Hyde Park Jazz Festival in Southside Chicago, not far from where he grew up. Each site revealed a small but personal story of Arab American identity and cultural production while placing me in proximity to multiple communities and histories.

I also attend to the politics of listening. A multi-sited research approach requires a flexible engagement with various listening bodies and spaces. For instance, I attended several large music festivals: the Ojai Music Festival, just north of Los Angeles; the Hyde Park Jazz Festival in Chicago; and the River to River Festival in lower Manhattan. Each space exposed me to different audiences and ways of hearing. Despite the liberal inclusion of Brown artists, these spaces often exposed forms of orientalist listening. The division of performer and audience also reinforced a racialized spectatorship that undermined the radical politics improvisatory practice seeks. An encounter with disparate bodies, sounds, and listening histories thus tells us how race and gender are differentially heard and shaped in various contexts over time. This approach is particularly important for navigating Asian American space. As Deborah Wong has written, “the construction of Asian American places/spaces/sites is doubly, triply complicated, as they are sometimes physically locatable but usually not; the boundaries of Asian American locales are continually open to redefinition” (2004: 10). Post-9/11 Brown space is perhaps even more fractured, demanding a flexible methodology that accounts for its unfolding spatial and temporal ruptures. I listen closely to these broken resonances through an autoethnographic methodology attuned to my own presence in the field.

Autoethnographies of Performance

“I am bound up socially with others making music and when that music is presented fully to my consciousness it is the music of the whole group, not simply “my” music”

–Titon (2008: 32)

Before starting this project, I knew that I wanted to position myself more self-consciously in the communities I was studying. This emerged through an improvisatory sensibility attuned to the dialogic relationship between individual and collective. Autoethnography provided a productive, yet not entirely infallible approach for navigating this tenuous terrain.²⁸ Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology that blends traditional ethnography, memoir, (auto)biography, narrative storytelling, oral and life history. As Reed-Danahay argues, autoethnography synthesizes elements of “postmodern ethnography” and “postmodern autobiography” to “question the binary conventions of a self/society split, as well as the boundary between the objective and the subjective” (1997: 2). Autoethnography thus unsettles ethnographic authority by acknowledging the researcher’s presence in, and impact on, the communities s/he studies. In short, an autoethnographic approach recognizes and seeks to unsettle the colonial binaries plaguing ethnographic research, as impossible as that may be.

²⁸ Autoethnography emerged in the Second Chicago School of sociology. Scholars have written about autoethnography in relation to emotion (Ellis and Bochner 2000; 2006; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010; Bochner and Ellis 2016; Ellis 1999), feminist methodology (Ettorre 2016), and performance (Denzin 2006; 2017; 2013).

Autoethnography is a powerful medium for scholars of color. For Mary Louise Pratt, this methodology is an important mode of self-representation for the subaltern that challenges dominant discourses through a “selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or conqueror” (2003: 28). I am inspired by Christina Sharpe’s vivid personal narrative of family death as an analytic for what she calls “wake work,” a “mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” in order to “imagine otherwise from what we know now in the wake of slavery” (2016: 18). Multi-ethnic scholars have particular stakes in autoethnographic attitudes. Lila Abu-Lughod has written about the “halfsie” anthropologist whose identification with multiple communities means that “when they present the Other they are presenting themselves...speak[ing] with a complex awareness of and investment in reception” (1991: 469). As a “halfsie” ethnomusicologist—both multiethnic and artist-scholar—I speak from an embodied personal experience of race and improvisation that raises the ethical stakes for the communities I study, many of which overlap with my own. While I am sensitive to what Kiran Narayan (1993) describes as the fetishization of the “native anthropologist” as authentic insider, I fully embrace this hybrid role.

I use forms of autobiographical reflection to integrate my dual identities as scholar-performer. Conventional scholarly discourse often maintains distance from one’s analytic “object” so as not to introduce a perceived subjective bias. On the other hand, autoethnography has been critiqued for its evocative emotionality, lack of critical analysis, and privileging of the narrator’s voice (Anderson 2006; Jackson and Mazzei 2008). In search of a methodological middle ground, I follow what Leon Anderson

(2006) describes as “analytic autoethnography,” which incorporates both reflexivity, the inclusion of an active researcher in the text, dialogue with informants beyond the self, and a commitment to an analytic agenda. This critically reflexive approach was useful during more narrative sections such as my reflection on growing up Brown that began this chapter. By weaving critical concepts on race, improvisation, and interculturalism within the narrative text, I could avoid the “evocative” pitfalls of autoethnography while raising the personal stakes of my broader theoretical inquiry. An analytic autoethnography also allowed me to creatively incorporate my own presence in relation to the artists and communities I was working with. Doing so helped capture the collaborative spirit of improvisation and bypass some of the biographical challenges of writing about individual musicians. In other cases, such as my analysis of voice in chapter three, I played down my own voice so as not to minimize the personal trauma Gopal had endured. Through this process, I’ve learned the importance of carefully tuning one’s narrative voice depending on the subject matter and its critical intent. Writing in this way wasn’t easy. It’s been an ongoing process of culling my personal experience for vivid moments that speak to the entanglement of self and society that defines ethnographic work on race and improvisation.

Performance is another potent site for the development of autoethnographic perspectives. Reflecting on his research of Bulgarian bagpipe music, Tim Rice describes his cultivation of “bagpipe fingers,” in which a kinesthetic and sonic awareness led to self-transformation in ways that blurred insider/outsider identities. Ultimately, when Rice abandoned the methods of cognitive anthropology and instead “acted musically,” he “fell

right into the gap between insider and outsider, into a theoretical ‘no place’ that felt very exciting, if not exactly like utopia... neither insider nor an outsider” (2008: 51).²⁹ I pursue similar performative writing throughout my dissertation, often moving in and out of various positionalities as researcher and improviser. The structure of my dissertation reveals a gradual process of performative immersion; from listener (chapter 2) to communal singer (chapters 3 and 4), and finally to active performer (chapter 5). This wasn’t pre-determined, but it did reflect my improvisatory desire for a more embodied and theoretical “no place” often lacking in conventional ethnographic writing. Working from this creative space might begin to disrupt the epistemological and methodological boundaries constraining a truly decolonial ethnomusicology.

These performative readings build on a genealogy of “artist-centered scholarship” (Lewis 2004; Modirzadeh 2011). “Writing between realms of intuition and intellect,” Modirzadeh suggests, “should invite critique that can help towards more inclusive sets of dialogue, including the recognition for musical artists to articulate their own research within scholarly formats reflective of the personal truths derived therefrom” (ibid.: 17). Writing from this position revealed similar moments of dialogue and self-transformation that helped me understand my subject position within the communities I moved through. This kind of work is ultimately political. As Deborah Wong reminds us, performative ethnography serves as a “politicized praxis” that “attends to the subjectivities engaged

²⁹ I was inspired by several performative autoethnographies; David Sudnow’s (Sudnow 1993) first-person phenomenological account of learning jazz piano, and Anthony Harrison’s (2014) study of underground hip hop production. For more on performance as methodology in ethnomusicology, see Barz and Cooley (2008) and Nettle (2015).

and probably transformed through performance,” while “mov[ing] between the subjectivities of the audiences, performers, the ethnographer, and others,” and “evok[ing] the choreographies and modalities of performance in order to break down the subject/object binary” (78–79). Such an ambitious task requires a re-thinking of the dialectics of ethnographic research and writing.

Dialogic Research and Writing

“Authorship is always-already collaborative and collective, at which point—what that would mean is that the authority that we tend to want to invest in authorship is always-already broken and disrupted and incomplete, so that in a weird way to say that authorship is collaborative is to say that it doesn’t exist at all”

–Moten (2019)

The conventional ethnographic interview is the backbone of ethnomusicological research. It provides insight into the voices, perspectives, and motivations of the musicians we study. Yet, as Christina Schwenkel argues, the method has “certain cultural and methodological assumptions and relations of power” that “might make this research technique also less practical: that of the authoritative interviewer directing questions toward, and receiving a flow of information from, a receptive interviewee” (2009: 17). I sought to disrupt this uni-directional flow through dialogic methodologies.

I employ what Wayne Fife describes as “fortuitous interviewing,” that unlike formal interviews, “takes advantage of the topics initiated by those whom we are doing our study on” and “makes use of the ‘lucky breaks’ that occur in naturalistic

conversations and turns them to our own advantage as researchers” (2005: 102). This approach mirrors the contingencies of improvisational performance. I often hung out before and after shows, striking up organic conversations with performers and listeners. Chatting with audience members and giving them the space to respond freely led to productive insights into the racialization of listening. One particular moment of fortuitous interviewing shifted the entire trajectory of my research. During my first interview with Rajna Swaminathan, she brought along vocalist Priya Gopal. The three of us sat in a noisy mid-town Manhattan coffee shop as I directed loosely structured questions on gender and intercultural performance to Swaminathan. Gopal would often interject, inserting bits of her own experience as a Karnatik singer in the jazz industry. As a result, I devoted an entire chapter to her moving, often traumatic story of voice and violence. Staying open and listening deeply to these improvisational “lucky moments” created a more intersectional analysis that expanded my study of post-9/11 Brown male performance. In short, a dialogic methodology open to the fortuitous and unexpected does real theoretical work.

Digital ethnographic approaches expand these dialogic sensibilities. I follow what Liz Przybylski describes as “hybrid ethnography,” an approach that “synthesizes participant observation that moves from the physical to the digital and back again” (2018: 379). In addition to conventional interviews, I used Skype as well as social media including Facebook and Instagram to track musicians’ movements and connect with them during busy touring schedules. In one case, I posted an Instagram photo of my working chapter on Priya Gopal. She responded instantly, surprised to see her name in the very

first sentence. We caught up on PhD life, and I offered to send her the chapter for feedback. Here, a casual digital encounter led to a moment of dialogism that blurred the lines between research and friendship. In another case, I emailed Amir ElSaffar some follow-up questions about his upbringing—he was on tour and didn't have time for an interview. I expected him to write back in long form. Instead, ElSaffar emailed several short clips spoken through a voice app on his iPhone. The exchange didn't have the improvisatory feeling of a live interview but it did allow us to gather our thoughts, providing a more focused, albeit composed, call and response. Unlike text-based email, I could also read the expressive nuances in the mediated grain of ElSaffar's voice in more detail. The result was a moving picture of his father's immigration from Iraq and family upbringing in a racially segregated Chicago that I use to open chapter four.

This dialogism flowed into the writing process itself. In his landmark study of the Kaluli people, *Sound and Sentiment* (Feld 2012), Steven Feld uses a dialogic approach that integrates various voices and discourses. As he writes, “‘dialogic editing,’ then, is the impact of Kaluli voices on what I tell you about them in my voice; how their take on my take on them requires reframing and refocusing my account” (1987: 191). I didn't set out to produce such intervocal writing. Our training as academics prepares us for a more solitary writing experience. But unlike literary criticism, ethnography entails interaction with real people—analytic “objects” who can and do often talk back. That my “subjects” were artist-scholars and trained ethnomusicologists (in Modirzadeh's case), produced curious inversions of ethnographic binaries. Throughout the writing process, I shared several chapter drafts with my interlocutors. They often replied with detailed in-text

edits; biographical details, mechanics, even critical analysis. In several instances, they altered their own voice in the interviews I painstakingly transcribed. This could have been a way of controlling the narrative—something not uncommon for the subaltern musician facing misrepresentation by critics. In many cases, it was a protection against ethical conflicts with academic institutions and recording companies. For me, these exchanges produced a generative space of collaborative inquiry. Like the Kalulis' take on Feld's take on them, these dialogic moments reveal an "already-collective" site of knowledge production that disrupts ethnographic authority and the perceived distance between self and Other. My singular voice blurs in these creative reinscriptions of voice, text, and sound.

Toward a "Sound Writing"

Writing about sound is hard work. Playing music with others enacts different sensorial experiences from writing, an act perceived as separate from the texts we read as omniscient analysts. And yet, the apparent distance between sound and writing is premised on an epistemological assumption based in a subject/object metaphysics. Deborah Kapchan has called for new theoretical frameworks outside these Cartesian dualities. "The myth of the detached analyst, in both the sciences and humanities," she writes, "is untenable not only because it assumes a hierarchy from which the objective ("true") observations can be made 'from outside' but because a theory rooted in only the intellectual is of necessity incomplete" (2017: 2). Instead, Kapchan describes what she calls "sound writing," that unlike "writing about sound" "breaks out of duality to inhabit a multi-dimensional position as translator between worlds, the writer listening to and

translating sound through embodied experience, the body translating the encounter between the word and sound, sound translating and transforming both word and author” (ibid.: 12).

Following Kapchan, I argue that “sound writing” must incorporate an underlying ethics, an inherent “soundness” or “goodness” that seeks more sustainable relations between self and Other, as contingent that binary is on an obsolete metaphysics of individuation. In writing from this collaborative space, I hope to develop a more “sound” writing that does real work in the world: that listens more closely to the layers of meaning that comprise improvised space today; that weaves others voices into my own without erasing the real differences between us, and; that like improvisation, imagines a more global future based in love and a shared stake in the multiple sound worlds we all inhabit.

Overview

My dissertation is structured around four interrelated case studies, each centered on an individual musician. The first two chapters focus on key South Asian American improvisers. Chapter two explores the politics of Afro-South Asian community building through the work of pianist Vijay Iyer. As the most visible South Asian American jazz musicians today, Iyer is a fruitful window into the limits and possibilities of post-9/11 Brown music making. I situate his work within a broader history of Asian American cultural production and Afro Asian encounter. I pay particular attention to his negotiation of contested Brown space in New York’s jazz and creative music scene. I focus my analysis on Iyer’s relationship to blackness through an autoethnographic reading of his role as artistic director for the 2017 Ojai Music Festival. Drawing on Frank Wilderson’s

(2008) notion of “Blackness-as-Absence,” I argue that the hypervisibility of brownness occludes the aurality of the black performing body. I close with a brief reflection on the im/possibilities of hearing blackness through Iyer’s duo project with trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke* (2016).

In chapter three, I examine the racialization of the South Asian female voice through a case study of vocalist Priya Gopal. Born in New York City, Gopal spent most of her childhood learning classical music and dance in South India. She later entered the commercial jazz industry with an intercultural album exploring the intersection of jazz and Karnatik music. But unlike Iyer, Gopal’s experience as a South Asian American singer exposed her to rampant exoticism and sexism that rendered her inaudible within a hypermasculine jazz space. In examining one particular recording experience, I theorize what I call *sonic auto-mimicry*, or the subaltern’s aural (re)production of racialized self. Drawing on Shilpa Davé’s ” (2013) construct of “brownvoice,” I argue that the female South Asian voice represents a contested site of symbolic gendered racial violence. I close by considering the utopian potentials of communal Brown singing through an autoethnographic reading of Gopal’s performance at Brooklyn Raga Massive, a non-profit organization dedicated to South Asian American cultural production and creative practice.

The last two chapters shift to the musical geographies of the Middle East. In chapter four, I focus on the work of Iraqi American trumpeter Amir ElSaffar. I examine his early musical training and listening history as a window into shifting racial dis/identifications amongst Arab Americans. In the early 2000s, ElSaffar began a decade-

long recovery of Iraqi *maqam*, the regional genre of Arabic classical music under threat from the US-led “long war” in Iraq. I examine the politics of cultural heritage within discourses on the archive (Taylor 2003) and pan-Arab diasporic critiques of empire. I focus on ElSaffar’s quintet “Two Rivers,” whose work across black and pan-Arab improvisatory forms bring the War on Terror and issue of Palestine into sharper relief. I close with an autoethnographic examination of the group’s performance at the Hyde Park Jazz Festival in South Side Chicago. Drawing on Alex Lubin’s (2014) work on Afro Arab politics, I argue that ElSaffar’s performance represents a *sonic geography of liberation*, or a musical space of dissonance and difference that imagines new forms of interminority relation outside colonial modernity.

Chapter five explores the decolonial potentials of intercultural improvisation through an analysis of Iranian American saxophonist and theorist Hafez Modirzadeh. Like ElSaffar, Modirzadeh’s multi-ethnic upbringing reveals a more complex picture of Middle Eastern American music and identity formation. In the late 1980s, Modirzadeh developed “chromodal discourse,” an interdisciplinary theory of cross-cultural exchange. I problematize musical universalism and situate the idea of chromodality within a genealogy of black techno-scientific interventions. I focus my analysis on the application of chromodal concepts in the academy through an ethnographic reading of Modirzadeh’s workshop at the California Jazz Conservatory in Berkeley, California. I consider the ethics of improvisatory listening and the role of intercultural practice in unsettling classroom hierarchies and Eurocentric knowledge systems. I close with an autoethnographic reflection of my experience as a performer at the 2017 ImprovisAsians

Festival!, a week-long series of performances and discussions held on the campus of San Francisco State University. I argue that intercultural improvisation serves as a site of fugitive planning and collaborative study (Harney and Moten 2013) with the potential to decolonize institutional epistemologies.

Chapter six is the concluding chapter. After my final summary, I briefly discuss the implications of these disparate case studies for the future of jazz community, the ethnographic archive, and the politics of listening. I return to Diana Taylor's notion of the "repertoire," in order to map the raced and gendered legacies transmitted through the repertoire of intercultural improvisation. I propose what I call a *listening repertoire*, an embodied space of ethical listening based in shared co-presence.

The entangled lives of these four artists highlight the tensions and possibilities surrounding intercultural improvisation in the post-9/11 era. They don't represent a comprehensive picture of the politics of Brown. But they do reveal a small glimpse into how South Asian American and Middle Eastern American musicians are seen and heard, and the role that improvisation might serve in imagining otherwise. I hope this work can provide a preliminary model for understanding the role of intercultural sound in building community toward the broader project of liberation, a "sound come-unity" sorely needed in the fractured post-9/11 world we all occupy.

Chapter 2

A Movement in Relation: Black Absence and the Promise of Afro-South Asia

In October 2017, I presented a conference paper about pianist Vijay Iyer at the annual meeting for the Society for Ethnomusicology in Denver, Colorado. The panel was on the politics of Afro Asian solidarity. I was nervous. It was my first time presenting at the conference and my initial attempt to talk through Iyer's music in a public setting. The paper went well, but I met some resistance. During the Q&A, a senior South Asianist pushed back against my focus on anti-blackness by pointing to Iyer's caste privilege. "When I hear Iyer, I hear caste supremacy!" she shouted defiantly from the back of the room. No doubt, Iyer's status as a Tamil Brahmin places him on the top of a social hierarchy that continues to oppress Dalits and other low-caste Indians. I didn't know how to respond. I deferred to Arathi Govind, a friend and co-organizer of the panel who had been working closely with Iyer for her dissertation. She reassured the disgruntled ethnomusicologist that Iyer is quite aware of his caste privilege but prefers to focus on issues of (anti)blackness given his identity as a South Asian American jazz artist.

A week later, Iyer emailed me. "I heard that your paper went over well," he wrote. He must have heard about my talk from Rajna Swaminathan, one of his doctoral students at Harvard, who was also in attendance. "I also heard about the matter of the caste question, which is certainly worth addressing," Iyer continued. "At any rate, would you be willing to share the paper with me at this point? It's okay if you'd rather not right now; I'm just a bit curious." I reluctantly sent him my essay—Iyer is not only an

accomplished improviser but quite an intimidating scholar. He responded with a long email, welcoming the caste critique but challenging its anti-Black assumptions.

As for the caste question, I do address it when I am asked, which is rarely in the West. In interviews, I am usually quick to remind people that I'm the child of privileged, educated, carefully curated Indian immigrants. I don't use those opportunities to educate about caste, because I find it more productive in the American context to talk about anti-Blackness... However, it cannot be said that I am concealing my caste, given that my very name marks me in that way, for those who know such things.³⁰

Iyer's response was striking, so critical and beautifully crafted. In one sense, it revealed the pianist's constant need to control the narrative. Iyer is used to defending himself against critics whose readings of his work often rely on model minority tropes. At the same time, this brief exchange highlights Iyer's self-awareness of his privileged role as a Brown artist-scholar and the political project he sees as more urgent in a US jazz context. Iyer also gave generous feedback on my paper, reminding me of his relationship to not only blackness but the broader Asian American creative scene that has shaped his work over the last two decades. For me, this dialogic encounter helped clarify Iyer's vexed role as a South Asian American jazz artist while creating a space of Brown knowledge production outside the white academic gaze.

In this chapter, I explore the politics of Afro-South Asian community building through an ethnographic case study of Vijay Iyer. I ask several questions: What are the tensions and pitfalls surrounding Afro-South Asian encounters? How do South Asian American artists navigate post-9/11 Brown space? How does improvisation imagine new

³⁰ Vijay Iyer, email correspondence with Dhiren Panikker, November 1, 2017.

forms of relationality to blackness? I begin by tracing a brief history of Afro Asian encounter throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. In dialogue with Afro-pessimist discourses, I consider the limits of an Afro-South Asian political alliance. Next, I trace Iyer's meteoric success in the jazz and culture industry, positioning his work within a broader context of Asian American cultural production and post-9/11 Brown community building. I then examine Iyer's contested relationship to blackness through an autoethnographic account of his role as music director for the 2017 Ojai Music Festival. Drawing on Frank Wilderson's (2008) notion of "Blackness-as-Absence," I argue that the hypervisibility of brownness occludes the aurality of the black performing body. I close with a brief reading of Iyer's duo project with trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke* (2016). I consider the im/possibilities of hearing blackness, and thus new forms of relation outside the liberal humanist project.

I focus on Vijay Iyer's work out of a love for his music and an interest in what it might tell us about the politics of race and community making in post-9/11 America. I first encountered his music as a graduate student at UC Irvine. I was inspired by his deep engagement with Indian classical music. His experiments with Karnatik rhythm avoided the cliché tropes plaguing many cross-cultural engagements with South Asian music and culture. I met Iyer in 2009 while working on my MFA thesis, "Indian American Jazz: An Emerging Hybridity (2010), which examined Iyer and fellow saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa's dialogue with Indian music within discourses on identity and diaspora.

In retrospect, I failed to contextualize the broader intercultural histories and racial complexities shaping their work. I also fell into model minority tropes celebrating the cerebral, Brown male genius. Despite these shortcomings, this work was a preliminary attempt to understand my own identity as a South Asian American artist-scholar, planting the critical seeds that inform my dissertation more broadly.

Several other scholars have written critically about Iyer and Mahanthappa. Arathi Govind characterizes their music as “Indo-Jazz,” in which jazz serves as a “strategy for exploring and forming unique, cohesive, and multifaceted Indian American identities” (2012: 2). Govind’s PhD dissertation (2019) examines Iyer’s work in more detail within the context of desi cultural production. Tanya Kalmanovitch’s dissertation has perhaps the most cogent analysis of Iyer. Like Govind, Kalmanovitch describes Iyer and Mahanthappa’s music as a genre of “identity jazz,” or a “form of avant-garde jazz that is explicitly concerned with formulations of race and ethnicity” (2005: 5). Kalmanovitch is particularly suspicious of Iyer’s claims to the category of Brown, which she argues conflates race, ethnicity, and class difference, allowing him to “speak for’ the global subaltern” (ibid. 161). I take this critique seriously. Class remains an undertheorized category of difference in Afro Asian discourse. But a narrow focus on “Indo-jazz” occludes the role that post-9/11 racial and gender politics play in the construction and negotiation of jazz identities and spaces. I fill in this lacuna through a close read of Iyer’s musical life within a post-9/11 framework. I hope this work provides a way to hear both black and Brown anew, in all their precarity and hope.

Preliminary Encounters

Asian Americans and African Americans remain an unlikely pair. Tropes of the exotic or brainy Asian subject are in stark contrast to conceptions of African Americans that fetishize the primitive black body. Black and Asian culture seem almost antithetical. African American musics are often linked to the corporeal; the natural and untrained black body remains an enduring trope in the white racial imagination. As McClary and Walser have written, black music functions as a “site where the body still may be experienced as primordial, untouched by the restrictions of culture,” while the “mind and culture still remain the exclusive property of Eurocentric discourse” (1994: 76). This excessive, hypermasculinized blackness is the antitheses of the mechanical and feminized Asian American performing body, whose presence in historically black genres is seen as a site of inauthenticity, incursion, and erasure. Within this framework, Afro Asia represents not just a contradiction but an impossibility.

These tensions ignore a longer history of Afro Asian encounter. A modern Afro Asian politics emerged through the forced melding of black and Brown peoples under Western colonialism. Across the British colonies, the demand for cheap labor following the abolition of slavery created a vacuum for a new immigrant workforce. Chinese and Indian “coolie” laborers filled these roles on sugar plantations and railroads across South Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean. Between 1834-1916, over a half-million East Indian laborers were forcibly taken to the Caribbean and South Africa. This new migrant work force occupied a racially inferior position in relation to European laborers. But their marginalized status didn’t guarantee alliances with former black slaves. Hostilities

emerged through spatial segregation, wage depression, and racialized stereotypes of Asian intelligence and black inferiority (Prashad: 2001). Despite these tensions, Asian and Afro-diasporic peoples often imagined a collective history of cultural exchange within the confines of oppressive colonial rule. For Vijay Prashad, these “polycultural” spaces were “grounded in antiracism rather than diversity,” and “unlike multiculturalism, assumes that people live coherent lives...made up of a host of lineages” (ibid.: xi-xii).

The movement of Asian migrants across North America enacted similar “polycultural” spaces. As Raphael-Hernandez and Steen point out, “the North American continent, situated between the geopolitical units of the Black Atlantic and the Asian/Pacific, has seen a unique high concentration of AfroAsian cultural interactions” (2006: 7). In the late nineteenth century, Indian traders settled throughout New England, where they often married African Americans and other women of color (Prashad 2000). Port cities provided the ideal conditions for such encounters. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a small group of itinerant Bengali Muslim traders settled in working-class communities of color throughout New York, New Orleans, and Baltimore, often raising families with black and Afro-Caribbean women. Vivek Bald’s (2013) vivid description of these Brown laborers living in humble tenements in Tremé, on the edge of Storyville, paints an intriguing jazz origin story that complicates conventional black/white narratives. These cross-racial encounters unsettle colonial histories of containment and the legal restrictions of interracial mixing.³¹

³¹ See Leonard (2010) for interracial marriages between Punjabi and Mexican Americans in Southern California.

But not all exchanges served interracial understanding. Marcus Garvey and Mahatma Gandhi often exploited their transnational connections to bolster ethno-nationalist agendas and rigid categories of “negro” and “Indian” (Slate 2012: 52). Early in his life, Gandhi considered Indians culturally superior to the native black South Africans, whom he referred to with the ethnic slur, “kaffirs.” And yet, productive alliances would blossom throughout the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s, Indian freedom fighters and Harlem Renaissance intellectuals imagined new linkages between Jim Crow racism and caste discrimination. W.E.B. Du Bois was particularly invested in the shared fate of black and Brown people under colonial rule. As he famously wrote in a 1919 article in the *Crisis*, “The sympathy of Black America must of necessity go out to colored India and colored Egypt... for we are all one—we the Despised and Oppressed—the ‘niggers’ of England and America” (1919: 8). Nico Slate describes these encounters as “colored cosmopolitanisms,” or “commonalities of struggle between colored people,” that “recognized how multiple oppressions intersected, and sought to forge alliances across social movements as well as national borders” (ibid. 120).

“Colored cosmopolitanisms” would merge through more musical, often subterranean means. My father recalls listening to old 78s of Paul Robeson with my grandfather, who fled Southern India to join Gandhi’s movement in the 1940s. By this time, Robeson’s iconic “Ol’ Man River” was already legible beyond the Mississippi and across the Indian ocean. Playback singer Bhupen Hazarika had a popular Hindi and Assamese versions of the Kern and Hammerstein classic. I imagine Robeson’s bass tones reverberating in my father’s curious ears, across the walls of their cramped flat, and

penetrating the dry, fetid Bombay air where they mingled in the clamor of street hawkers and rickshaw horns. The sorrow songs of the black south converge with the freedom calls of a nascent Indian modernity in the colored cosmopolitan ears of a precocious boy, who twenty years later found himself on the whitened shores of New England. These imagined encounters highlight the role that mediated sound and listening play in imagining new Afro Asian geographies in the dawn of post-colonial globality.

Decolonization would inspire new alliances across national and cultural borders. The 1955 Bandung Conference was a significant moment in an emergent Afro Asian political consciousness. In the wake of African and Indian independence, leaders of non-aligned nations across Africa and Asia forged new alliances in opposition to Western colonialism. As Ho and Pullen argue, this transnational forum reflects a “watershed and high-water mark of black-Asian affiliation and the unfinished and imperfect dream of a road still being pursued” (2008: 5). Bandung would influence important antiracist movements including the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) and the Third World Liberation Movement (TWLF), which I discuss in more detail in chapter five. At the same time as Bandung, Martin Luther King Jr. and other Civil Rights activists utilized Gandhian forms of *satyagraha*, or civil disobedience, as a chief political tactic. These affiliations were reciprocal. During the 1970s and 1980s, the radical separatist group, the Tamil Tigers, drew from the cultural nationalist rhetoric and tactics of the Black Panthers in their fight against oppressive Sri Lankan rule. More recently, Black Lives Matter activists have forged solidarities with global freedom struggles, including the fight for Dalit rights in India.

These conditional Afro Asian partnerships highlight the reciprocity of interracial encounter, and their foundation in a radical antiracist and anticolonial politics. The shared fight against whiteness provides the context for an Afro Asian configuration to become legible. But as Tamara Roberts reminds us, Afro Asia doesn't represent the "meeting of the two racial groups as separate entities." Rather, "new collectives are formed out of these encounters that exist as their own holistic unity, distinct from both black and Asian" (2016: 20). Afro Asia can thus be defined as a contingent and relational political formation based in entangled histories of domination and resistance, rather than a fusion of isolated cultural entities or subject positions bound by incommensurable difference.³² 9/11 and its aftermath has altered the terms of this interracial confluence, particularly for South Asian Americans whose experience of Islamophobic violence has positioned them on the borders of a conventional Asian American rubric. Nevertheless, the diverse sounds, artists, and collectives that I explore here and elsewhere in my dissertation, emerge from this rich and often uneven genealogy of Afro Asian encounter.

But we must also attend to the unspoken ideological commitments of Afro-Asian studies as an emergent discipline. This interdisciplinary field arose in the wake of the 1992 LA uprising and as a critical outgrowth of the multi-racial political movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Chang and Leong 2017). Afro-Asian scholars define African Americans and Asian Americans as mutually constructed racial categories (Aarim-Heriot

³² The labels we use to define identity formations do matter. To me, the singular term "AfroAsia" can elide structural differences between African American and Asian American subject positions. Meanwhile, "Afro-Asia" implies a fixed binary between discreet and essentialized categories. Thus, I use Tamara Roberts' (2016) term "Afro Asia," which signifies a relational construction of race attentive to difference.

and Daniels 2003; Jun 2011; Kim 1999). A parallel strain examines the two group's shared experience of marginalization as people of color, particularly within the context of Third World Solidarity (Ho and Mullen 2008; Raphael-Hernandez and Steen 2006; Prashad 2001). Attention to long-standing Afro Asian affinities unsettles rigid black/white binaries plaguing US race relations, thus exposing whiteness as the unmarked analytic category at the core of all racial antagonisms.

But as Albert Tiongson argues, Afro-Asian inquiry also reflects a problematic comparative turn in ethnic studies that often erases the particularity of blackness and indigeneity. For Tiongson, these discourses rely on an "Asian American analogical dependency" "hing[ing] on the assumption that Asian Americans and African Americans occupy analogous historical and political positions" (2015: 48). Tiongson points to the fetishization of Bandung and other sites of Afro-Asian encounter as embodying a "triumphalist and teleological narrative" of interracial solidarity bent on transcending the black/white racial binary (Ibid.). Ultimately, Tiongson calls for a more critical analysis of the foundational nature of blackness and settler colonialism, in order to counter the facile analogies plaguing Afro-Asian inquiry.³³

Afro-pessimism provides useful, albeit controversial tools for addressing these interminority antagonisms. Building on the work of Frantz Fanon and Orlando Patterson, Afro-pessimists scholars examine the structural position of blackness, defined as an ontological condition of social death resulting from chattel slavery and its "afterlife"

³³ Tamara Nopper (2013) similar argues that the sentimental historicization of Afro Asian unity personified by Bandung relies on a colonial analogy that occludes the "singularity of racial slavery" and its afterlife. For more on the pitfalls of Afro-Asian inquiry, see Yancey (2003).

(Hartman 1997). Blackness is conceived of not as a stable identity category or conscious social agent, but a “structural position of noncommunicability, in the face of all other positions... predicated in modalities of accumulation and fungibility rather than alienation and exploitation” (Gordon 2010: 58–59). As “captive being for another,” African Americans thus exists outside of relationality, and thus, modernity itself. This framework shifts our understanding of US racial hierarchies from a conventional black/white binary to an impassable black/non-black antagonism. Any inclusion into civil society amongst immigrants and non-black people of color, whom Wilderson describes as “junior partners” in partial allegiance with white supremacy, upholds complicity with anti-black structures that are its precondition (2003: 23). Thus, for the upwardly mobile Asian American subject, assimilation and incorporation into American civil society only reinforces the ontological status of the Black as non-Human.³⁴

From this vantage, liberal discourses of solidarity are called into question. Solidarity has become a trope for an altruistic but often colorblind strategy amongst both white liberals and minorities. Non-black youth continue to consume blackness through notions of a shared marginalization as people of color. These assumed congruencies are prevalent in the desi community, who have turned to black culture as a gesture of defiance. For me, black vernacular rhythms and poetics provided a powerful mode of

³⁴ Wilderson’s notion of “junior partners” has been rightfully critiqued. In her review of *Red, White, and Black*, Malia Bruker points to the limits of Afro-pessimist discourse surrounding issues of indigeneity and migrant labor. As she argues, “Although it may be true that no other racial group in the United States has the same ontological struggles, for some readers it may seem an oversight to describe groups such as undocumented immigrants as ‘junior partners’ when they are currently facing what most liberatory activists would characterize as slave-like working conditions, mass roundups, inhumane Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facilities, and draconian legislation” (2011: 68).

identification and resistance, particularly during the wave of Brown peril in the mid-1990s. Given the conditional Afro Asian alliances outlined above, my relational encounter with blackness through listening served as a conditional space of affiliation and creative medium to address the liminality of brownness. These encounters would blossom in the early 2000s, as South Asian Americans used hip hop to critique post-9/11 racialization and state surveillance. But these earnest affiliations often occurred in a racial vacuum with minimal contact with actual African Americans, thus perpetuating the commodification of blackness as property. As Shana Redmond argues, such liberal politics of identification “take[s] for granted the structures that allow for and welcome its articulation,” while relying on “claims to sameness” that “dismiss the particularities of black existence and thereby devalue black life” (2016: 42). For Jarod Sexton, these naïvely invoked symmetries reveal a “people of-colorblindness,” or a “refusal to acknowledge significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies.” As Sexton argues, this refusal “ignores the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy—thinking (the afterlife) of slavery as a form of exploitation or a species of racial oppression” (2010: 48). In sweeping critical strokes, Sexton dispels the utopian myth of multiracial unity by highlighting the foundational role that blackness plays in structuring *all* racial formations. Given the ontological position of blackness as social death within Afro-pessimist paradigms, Sexton’s critique thus calls into question the efficacy and even possibility of an Afro Asian political alliance.

Fred Moten provides a critical counterpoint to these black existentialist discourses by considering the nature of black social life. In his re-reading of Fanon's notion of black pathology, Moten writes of blackness not as a permanent form of "social death," but a "being-toward-death," whose inherent sociality serves as the condition of possibility for its exclusion from and threat towards the social life denied to it (2008: 188). What emerges in this "refusal of standpoint," he argues, "is (not) just that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology... blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, that it is ontology's anti-and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space" (2003: 739). Rather than an incommensurable state of "social death," Blackness thus escapes the ontological and juridical grips of Modernity through a fugitivity grounded in social and relational life.

For Moten, this alternative black sociality is situated in the hold, the physical and metaphorical space of containment that Christina Sharp describes as the prison, the migrant ship, and the "womb that produces blackness" (2016: 27). But this fugitive no-place is most audible in the sounds and politics of the black radical tradition, Cedric Robinson's (2005) term for a uniquely black intellectual and aesthetic project emerging in slave marronage. For Moten, the black radical tradition represents a site of "rupture and collision," a movement in the "not-in-between," marked by both a presence and loss of Africa encoded in improvisatory song (2017: 10). Black improvisational practices provide a vessel for such radical incursions through their reliance on individual

expression within an intersubjective field of collective listening. The black radical tradition thus embodies the critical break that is blackness; a non-place at the interstices of social life and death, a space that is “out-from-the-outside” (Ibid.).

From here, we might conceive of Afro-South Asia in a slightly different register. The aural presence of Robeson in my father’s ears and my own embrace of gangsta rap poetics, however displaced, serve as moments of rupture and collision located outside the ontological boundaries of Modernity. For the post-9/11 Brown subject, this improvised encounter with blackness thus serves as a movement in the “not-in-between,” a fugitive congruence that forecasts new forms of relationality. The relational experience of these rhythms and poetics allow us to move, via Moten, past Afro-pessimism’s exceptionalization of blackness, and toward a recentering of other forms of racialized erasure. An analysis of Vijay Iyer’s precarious position as a Brown subject within and in relation to black radical histories thus offers insight into the contradictions and tensions between these analytic frames and the promise of Afro-South Asia as a contested interracial imaginary.

Improvising (South) Asian America

Vijay Iyer was born in Albany, New York in 1971, just after the Immigration and Nationality Act opened the US borders to a new demographic of upwardly mobile Asian immigrants. His Tamil Brahmin parents weren’t musicians, nor did they impose the Classical Indian arts as a benchmark of cultural exceptionalism. At three years old, Iyer began violin lessons through the Suzuki method, which emphasizes listening and solfege over the mindless note reading typical of early childhood music education. But he

gravitated to the piano, improvising and imitating songs off the radio by ear. Iyer often jokes that no one ever told him to play in a certain way. His relationship with the instrument became “as natural as respiration.”³⁵

During high school, Iyer served as violin concertmaster in the orchestra while playing keyboards in the school’s jazz and rock bands. But like many young South Asian Americans, he was primed for a career in the sciences. After earning his undergraduate degree in math and physics from Yale University, Iyer attended UC Berkeley, where he created his own interdisciplinary PhD program in Technology and the Arts.³⁶ Around that time, he began performing in small jazz clubs around town. He was the house pianist for a jam session at North Oakland’s historic Bird Kage, home to local jazz greats and guest artists including saxophonist Pharaoh Saunders. Iyer also began playing with own groups; the Vijay Iyer Trio, the Poisonous Prophets, and as a sideman in the socially conscious hip hop group, Midnight Voices. From 1995-2000, Iyer played extensively with saxophonist-composer Steve Coleman, performing on several international tours and appearing on four of his commercially released albums. Coleman’s intercultural work, among many others, would stimulate Iyer’s creative engagement with heritage as a young South Asian American improviser.

³⁵ Vijay Iyer, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, March 6, 2017.

³⁶ Iyer’s dissertation (2002) examines embodied cognition in Afro-diasporic music. His work is a significant intervention in conventional music cognition studies, which privilege Eurocentric paradigms. His work is now part of a growing body of research on embodied and situated cognition and is often cited in contemporary scholarship on the subject.

Iyer also encountered a rich Asian American creative music scene made possible by San Francisco's long history of Asian migration and political activism. In the mid-1990s, he began performing with Asian Improv aRts (AIR), a pan-Asian American music collective with deep roots in the Asian American Movement. But AIR wasn't about establishing an exclusive Asian American space. As Deborah Wong has written, AIR is "committed to the idea of Asian American music, but in the end, this music always emerges relationally—either between musicians in performance, or in terms of ethnic and racial bridge building" (2004: 277). AIR members align themselves with African American artists and creative histories.³⁷ They have forged direct connections with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a Chicago-based artist collective that created new artistic and economic frameworks for black musicians in the 1960s. Thus, Iyer's presence in AIR was a natural extension of the group's broad vision of Asian American music and identity.

In the mid-1990s, Iyer began performing at various AIR sponsored events. He played at the organization's annual Asian American Jazz Festival, and his first two albums were recorded on their independent label. But despite AIR's inclusivity, Iyer felt somewhat marginal as one of the only South Asian American musicians in a predominantly East Asian American collective. Since its inception in the late 1980s, AIR

³⁷ Founding members Fred Ho, Francis Wong, and Jon Jang, were all members in the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS), a Marxist-Leninist group founded by black poet and critic Amiri Baraka. They were inspired by the Black Arts Movement, a network of artists, musicians, and activists founded by Amiri Baraka and dedicated to black cultural production in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and assassination of Malcolm X. I discuss AIR history in more detail in chapter five. For more on AIR's relationship to African American music, see Asai (2005), Dessen (2006), Kajikawa (2012), Wong (2004).

has been comprised of primarily third and fourth generation Chinese and Japanese Americans. The collective does include a few musicians of indigenous, Filipino, and Iranian descent, the latter of which I explore in more detail in chapter five. But Iyer was the first South Asian American to join the AIR fold, his entry marked by racial precarity.

In February 2017, I met with Iyer in San Francisco for one of the many interviews we've had over the last decade. Iyer was in town for a week-long gig at the SF Jazz Center, one of the largest concert venues in the US dedicated exclusively to jazz. We greeted each other in the lobby of the Holiday Inn, where he was staying during his visit. He was in a hurry, walking a pace or two ahead of me through the rainy streets. Iyer can come across reserved, almost cold. But I would later discover his warmth and openness. We stopped at a local brunch spot in Japantown, not far from the local community centers and performance spaces central to AIR activity. The interview was conversational. Two Brown guys just chatting. We discussed his engagement with black music and the limits of Afro Asian solidarity. I told him about my father's experience of racism while working as a laborer in Greece, how it revealed a different picture of the post-1965 model minority. He nodded in agreement.

Iyer's described his early experience in the AIR community. He met Wong and Jang through saxophonist Harold Yen, a student in Jang's Asian American Music class at UC Berkeley. Iyer and Yen played together in a small group around town. Issues of ownership and visibility quickly emerged. "We had a group together," Iyer said, "where I wrote all the music, and somehow Harold would often get all the credit. That was a little awkward." He laughed. "In fact, if you look at some of these reports from our debut at

the Asian American Jazz Festival, it makes it seem like it was his band.” This was surprising given Iyer’s hypervisibility in the jazz industry today. But Iyer wasn’t necessarily bitter about it, pointing to the lack of Asian diversity in AIR as the reason for his racialized omission. “I think it was partly because there weren’t any other South Asians in the mix yet, and Hafez [Modirzadeh] was the first non-East Asian to be a part of the community.”³⁸ Iyer was also concerned with what he saw as a lack of outreach in the South Asian community. Much of AIR’s work centered around the Chinese and Japanese American communities central to Bay Area Asian American life. As a result, Iyer’s early albums were often marketed at Chinese American bookstores and other cultural centers, rather than the South Asian hubs he traversed in nearby Palo Alto.

Iyer’s experience highlights the precarious nature of South Asian American identity formation. Despite being historically categorized as white, South Asian Americans are often situated under the rubric of a pan-Asian American identity. But post-9/11 racialization has shifted their location in US racial hierarchies. As Nitasha Sharma has written, “Brown is both part of and expands beyond Asian America. Referring to Latinos, Filipinos, South and Southeast Asians, Arabs, and “Muslim-looking” people, and others, its flux reminds us to question the seemingly fixed boundaries of all racial categories” (2015: 19-20). Iyer’s own illegibility in AIR space, even in the pre-9/11 era, thus reveals the limits of ethnicity in defining pan-Asian American formations, and the need for a broader and more nuanced engagement with communities of color in order to realize the unfulfilled promise of Afro Asia as an interracial imaginary.

³⁸ Jon Jang and Francis Wong, interview by Dhiren Panikker, February 5, 2016.

A week after my interview with Iyer, I met Francis Wong and Jon Jang at a busy restaurant in the heart of Chinatown, just across from the new Asian Improv corporate headquarters at the Chinese Cultural Center. The two artist-scholars are founding AIR members with a long history in the Asian American movement. Wong and Jang were interested in my project and eager to talk about Iyer's role in the scene. Jang spoke passionately and urgently about Black-Asian collaboration. Wong is quieter and more patient, but speaks with a precision and depth of critical thought. Our two-hour conversation was unwieldy. It was difficult to hear them over the clamor of bodies and endless stream of food. And it was even harder to keep them focused on Iyer given their excitement to talk about Asian American music and politics in a more casual setting.

Jang described Iyer as a kind of "South Indian futurist," relating his work to Sun Ra and other black pianist-composers from Duke Ellington to Cecil Taylor and Elmo Hope. He described a vivid moment during Iyer's performance of Jang's compositions at the 1994 Asian American Jazz Festival: "I remember it pretty well, because Vijay really focused on this fermata that I wrote. Maybe in jazz, they don't use fermatas. I just remember that, and I was like, 'he's pretty serious.' He just seemed very mindful." Fermatas, or brief pauses between musical sections, are often seen as superfluous transitions between more important thematic material. Iyer's focus on these relatively insignificant silences reveals his artistic commitments and listening presence, both valuable qualities in Asian American creative music.

Iyer's identity as a South Asian American and relationship to black music was another sign of affiliation. "We were trying to embrace transnationalism," Jang recalled.

“One of the things that Vijay recognized, like Francis and I and others, was that we respected the black music tradition in the United States. That’s one thing he did very well, with integrity.” Iyer’s deep and ethical commitment to black music coincided with a broader shift in AIR politics during the late 1990s and early 2000s. As Wong recalled,

We were exploring the increasing lack of relevance of the Asian American pan-ethnic framework...We were looking to dismantle that idea of Asian American, even though our name is Asian Improv. That’s why we were releasing albums with Hafez, and we released albums by African Americans...So we were trying to put the Asian American a little more in the background... I think it was more by self-definition, so then people would then be attracted to Asian Improv based on our music and politics as opposed to our ethnicity. So, I think we were grappling with the limits to ethnicity and the limits to culture as definers of an artistic movement.

Iyer’s identity as a South Asian American creative artist thus aligned with AIR’s self-conscious shift away from the narrow ethnic frameworks defining Asian American identity politics. While remaining committed to Asian American community building, the group would take an even wider political vision after 9/11, a critical move that I chart in chapter five. Despite Iyer’s initial illegibility, the experience would shape his creative vision and commitment to community building as an artist-scholar of color. As Iyer recalled, “The mentality about building community around a certain shared experience—which has to do with the experience of difference and marginalization, but also delving in terms of what that heritage could mean for you—basically in my apprenticeship, in my presence among them, that’s where I learned about that possibility” (Ibid.).

Later that week, I attended Iyer’s opening night listening party at SF Jazz featuring a Q&A with SF Jazz Director of Education Rebeca Mauleón. I sat in the

orchestra seats with Arathi Govind, who was also doing fieldwork for her dissertation chapter on Iyer. Two Brown scholars scribbling fieldnotes and quietly discussing Iyer's critical reception in a moment of collaborative ethnography. Mauleón described Iyer's triumphant return to SF Jazz as "Vijay by the Bay." We all laughed. Iyer spoke about the impact of Bay Area musical life on his work. He talked about playing in Oakland jam sessions, learning West African rhythms from a local Ghanaian drummer, and working with African American improvisers such as George Lewis and Steve Coleman. He also acknowledged the profound influence of Asian Improv aRts on his career trajectory as an artist of color. This brief moment of recognition was powerful given the lack of AIR visibility amongst SF Jazz elite. The feeling was mutual. Both Modirzadeh and Jang were in attendance throughout the week. Their love and support for the once-twenty-something Brown kid from Rochester now turned jazz demigod was moving.

After moving to New York City in the early 2000s, Iyer would become one of the most visible South Asian American jazz musicians in the world. He has performed at some of the most acclaimed concert halls and festivals across North America, Europe, and the Middle East. He has topped Downbeat jazz critics polls, his name echoing from NPR to the New Yorker. After receiving a MacArthur Genius Grant in 2013, Iyer became Franklin D. and Florence Rosenblatt Professor of the Arts at Harvard University. He would use this opportunity to form creative Brown community within contested white space. But Iyer would also encounter a critical gaze based in cultural gatekeeping and regressive model minority tropes. In this next section, I trace Iyer's negotiation of these conflicting spaces in an effort to map the precarities of Brown in post-9/11 life.

Bodied Bodies: Negotiating Brown Space in the Racialized State

Sarah Sharma has written about the production of Brown in a post-9/11 moment.

Through ethnographic case studies of Toronto based taxi drivers, Sharma theorizes what she calls “Brown space,” a “site where the knowledge of brown is produced and then disciplined” (2010: 185) Drawing on Foucault’s notion of biopower, Sharma describes “Brown space” as not only under surveillance and scrutiny, but a regulating and disciplining force enacted outside the social order and normalized civic space. “Brown, because it refuses fragmented categories,” she writes, “is seen to pose a greater biological and physical threat to the public. It is imagined as an uncontainable quality—the parameters of what is Brown (what may be a threat, can) extend (infinitely) to no end” (ibid.: 187).³⁹ This framework points to the production of Brown space, not as an identificatory strategy, but a spatial configuration distinguished from an idealized civic space construed as “one without Brown” (ibid.: 185). How do Brown bodies negotiate white public space? Can improvisation offer alternative sites of Brown belonging outside the white gaze? I explore these questions through a brief ethnographic reflection of my experience with Iyer in several interconnected spaces, both public and private.

In March 2016, I flew into New York City for another short research trip. I take a Lyft from the airport and into Park Slope, the upscale Brooklyn neighborhood I stayed in throughout my fieldwork. I make small talk with my cab driver Mourad, a recent Moroccan immigrant. He tells me how long it will take to bring his wife to the US

³⁹ Sharma is careful to distinguish this racialized construction from other invisible brown presences such as “Latina nannies, dog-walkers, Mexican gardeners, and Sri Lankan cooks” (ibid.: 186).

because of Donald Trump, who was elected just four months earlier. I take the subway into mid-town Manhattan, bodies touching in public space. I sit next to several Jamaican and Dominican college students. I overhear them talking about their experience of racialization as people of color, how whiteness rules the day. One guy complains about how he often becomes the representative of all black people. They talk about the fact that African Americans will always be second-class citizens. Part of me feels like a voyeur. But I also feel some naïve kinship with them, perhaps to Mourad as well. In retrospect, I see the rifts and potentials in the post-9/11 Brown formation; the ethnic and class ruptures at its core, the black absence, the relation, the tenuous hope of it all.

I meet with saxophonist Aakash Mittal for drinks near the Kaufman center, where Iyer is playing later that night. I feel a connection to Mittal. We are around the same age, both multi-ethnic South Asian American jazz musicians who grew up in a primarily white cultural milieu. Raised in Boulder, Colorado, Mittal moved to New York City to be part of the jazz and creative music community. He is a working musician, teaching at a public school in Manhattan, playing jazz casuals, and composing orchestral band pieces. Mittal has also created his own intercultural aesthetic inspired by the work of Iyer and Mahanthappa, his “Brown heroes” as he later described them to me. We met several times at his apartment in nearby Prospect Lefferts Gardens, a historically Caribbean and African American working-class neighborhood in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn. He has an old spinet in the living room, and we would often jam on Monk tunes or play free improvisations. His tenor sound echoes Mahanthappa’s grainy timbre. In between sessions, we would sit around his small kitchen table drinking whiskey, talking about

music and identity. An intimate space of Brown belonging echoes through the cramped flat in hushed voice and song.

We walk to the Kaufman Center to get tickets for the show. The performance is part of the Ecstatic Music Festival, a small annual new music festival curated by Judd Greenstein. As CEO of New Amsterdam Records, who released Amir ElSaffar's recent large ensemble record, Greenstein promotes what he calls "post-genre," an amorphous musical category seeking to transcend genre through a borderless "music without walls, without an agenda, and without a central organizing principle" (2019). Iyer's presence unsettles these post-racial discourses. He's performing with Thums Up, a South Asian American collective featuring guitarist Rafiq Bhatia, drummer Kassa Overall, and MC Himanshu Suri, known for his work with the hip hop group Das Racist. The group appears "borderless," traversing hip hop, spoken word, free jazz, rock, and ambient electronica. The presence of Pakistani-born vocalist Arooj Aftab, known for what Greenstein identifies as a "neo-Sufi" sound, feeds into a desire for new music exotica. But unlike the apolitical "post-genre" moniker, their music has a clear agenda organized around a conscious confluence of Brown bodies and voices. The name of the group was inspired by "Thums Up," a drink created after the removal of Coca Cola from India in the late 1970s. Like the Indianized fizzy drink, the band reimagines what it means to be Brown in the post-9/11 world.

The audience is mostly white, reflecting a conventional new music demographic. But an alternative Brown presence fills the space. I sit toward the back of the small theatre with Mittal. Vocalist Priya Gopal and mridangam player Rajna Swaminathan,

both Iyer's students at Harvard's cross-disciplinary PhD program, sneak up to the front row to watch their mentor perform. Suri introduces the band, purposely mispronouncing Overall's name. "I just wanted to mess up the one non-Indian in the band," he says. The audience chuckles. The band wears their politics on their sleeves. On "Hindu(ism) in a Bottle," Suri addresses histories of orientalism, essentialism, and exoticism in the desi community. Another tune addresses post-9/11 drone warfare. Clusters of older white audience members leave during the middle of the set. Gopal later told me that it was probably because their two-hour parking ticket expired. I doubt it. During the break, I overhear a couple of older white men talking in the bathroom. They were excited about the Kronos quartet's performance at the festival the following week. "This concert was more political," one guy says. They both laugh.



Figure 2.1: Thums Up, image by Dhiren Panikker

Suri calls vocalist Arooj Aftab back to the stage for the last tune, “My Son the Fanatic.” The title of the track comes from the short story by Hanif Kureishi and the subsequent film *My Son the Fanatic* (1997), which depicts a London-based Pakistani taxi driver caught in the grips of Islamic fundamentalism. Suri flips the narrative into a powerful commentary on post-9/11 life. Aftab begins with a long *alaap*-like introduction. Her low, reverb-drenched voice echoes atop an improvised drone in A minor. Cyclic guitar riffs, mallet rolls, and upper-register piano tremolos punctuate the dramatic pauses in her long vocal phrases. “They’re turning my son into a fanatic,” Suri speaks over a growing pad of sound. He mentions Malcolm X and Rodney King’s “bashed in head” alongside the torture detention centers. “My son the fanatic, he’s only a boy,” Suri echoes the line in broken cadence atop a dark groove; cyclic piano octaves rising and intersecting with militant snare rolls and Aftab’s elongated phrases. (0:09). “He’s only a boy,” Suri repeats several times with urgency. “A body bodied in the lights of inauguration night.” Suri floats his hand above his head several times over the line, “lights of inauguration night.” (0:26). Suri echoes the chorus, “my son the fanatic, he’s only a boy, he’s only a boy.” He seems to be moved to tears, stopping briefly to dry his eyes (0:37). Bhatia plays ascending open chords with heavy distortion against Iyer’s percussive rolls, driving bass drum hits, and Aftab’s searing vocals (1:01). Suri’s voice is nearly covered, “my son, my son, my son,” (1:21). The video cuts out. “Black and Brown bodies ain’t nothing but food.” He repeats. “For white politicians, white politicians, white politicians.” Suri stumbles through the lyrics purposefully. “In the night, in the light, in the night, in the light of inauguration lights.” The tune continues to grow in density and speed before

fading into grainy guitar fills, cymbal flourishes, and Aftab's decaying vocal refrain. We sit in near silence for almost twenty seconds before erupting in applause.



Media 2.1: "My Son the Fanatic," video by Dhiren Panikker

This brief musical snapshot reveals the hopes and perils surrounding post-9/11 Brown music making. It was beautiful to see so many South Asian American voices on stage. I hadn't heard Iyer in this setting and his presence amongst other Brown bodies challenged his positioning as singular jazz hero. At the same time, the performance revealed gendered fissures surrounding the construction of Brown musical space. I don't think Aftab was a token afterthought—she did perform an entire set earlier that evening. But her peripheral status in the collective hierarchy of sounds could be read as a gendered accessory to the group's masculine configuration. Unlike Suri's vocal presence, Aftab remained a somewhat aural trace—her "neo-Sufi" sound playing into the festival's desire for the exotic and erotic brownvoice, a racialized performative I examine in more detail in chapter three. This desire for the Brown female voice was that much more unsettling given the group's radical critique of violence.

But the band's political message was clear and it was moving. "My Son the Fanatic" operated on many levels. The highly improvised piece inverted the discourse on "terrorism" into an uncovering of state violence and terror. Suri's double metaphors of inauguration nights/lights speak to the violent shadows lurking behind the US political stage and theatre of war, while his reference to "bodied bodies" highlights the corporeal

violence that both marks and produces Brown bodies in white space. But this critique wasn't just about Brown bodies (bodied). The reference to Rodney King and Malcolm X highlights the ongoing violence inflicted on black people, thus activating a powerful Afro South Asian imaginary that exceeds racial and ethnic boundaries. Suri didn't mince words either. His mantra, "Black and Brown bodies ain't nothing but food for white politicians," leaves no room for interpretation. Suri's momentary tears and our long stillness after the set registered its affective urgency. But this critical Brown presence could also be seen as a threat when heard within the festival context, a borderless white space construed as "one without brown." The dramatic exit of audience members, perhaps just to renew parking, highlights a suspicion of the loud Brown bodies occupying white space. While the band's presence was perhaps welcomed in some gesture of liberal inclusion, it also signified a potential threat to be controlled, managed, and erased.

A contested Brown space extended beyond the confines of the performance. After the show, Iyer invites me to a post-gig hang at Vanguard, an upscale wine bar just around the corner from the Kaufman. Iyer makes a point to distinguish it from "The Vanguard," the iconic New York jazz club where he was only just recently invited to play. I walk with Iyer, Bhatia and his partner Nina Moffitt, Swaminathan, Gopal, and Mittal; an unwieldy Brown collective occupying public space. We enter the bar. The long, narrow space is packed with mostly white people. We cluster near the front, blocking the entrance. The bartender tells us we can't stand there. Iyer finds a booth for us in the very back of the bar. We press through the crowd, Bhatia clumsily lugging his guitar and amp. "Brown people taking over," Iyer mutters under his breath.

We spread out across two tables, creating a circular Brown formation. I sit next to Bhatia and Moffitt. A vocalist and improviser, Moffitt tells me about working with Hafez Modirzadeh at Banff and her efforts to incorporate his chromodal concept. Gopal and Swaminathan sit quietly against the side wall. Iyer sits near the center of the makeshift circle. He seems more relaxed outside the audience gaze. Iyer orders three more bottles of wine, filling our glasses and waiting patiently to toast. Garnette Cadogan joins us. A Jamaican-born essayist and visiting scholar at NYU's Institute for Public Knowledge, Cadogan tells us about his recent article on the politics of walking (2016), which explores the ways that black bodies negotiate white urban spaces. I think of our negotiation of white public space. "What does it mean to walk while Brown?"

We talk about music and politics. Trump is a hot topic. Iyer mentions the recent crying since his election. I think of Suri's performative wail, "my son, my son, my son." We talk about the wiretapping scandal, debating whether Trump would really last four years. Sadly, he would. Cadogan says that he had to cancel a recent international trip, fearing that he wouldn't be able to return to the US with a green card. I remember Iyer saying that he carries his passport everywhere he travels, even to the grocery store. Mittal mentions the recent shootings in Kansas in which two South Indian computer engineers were mistakenly identified as Iranian. "Get out of my country, you terrorist," the white shooter shouted before killing them both. It happened in a local bar, a Dixie version of Vanguard perhaps. We make our way out of the bar at around 2 am, Brown shadows dispersing into cacophonous urban space.

In some ways, our post-gig hang was ordinary. Musicians, tired and hungry, looking for any place to unwind. But our occupation of Vanguard marked a particular negotiation of racialized space. Our initial Brown presence was perhaps seen as a threat, differentiated from the dominant white space structuring the bar. But another Brown sociality emerged. Our occupation of the back of the restaurant wasn't a hostile takeover, but it did create a liminal space of Brown community. Our circular formation marked a semi-permeable boundary that demarcated our bodies and voices from the broader white surround, allowing us to move and speak in ways restricted in more public civic space. Our conversations on surveillance and racial terror—amongst many other mundane topics of the day—thus extended the political critique on stage, making audible our marked subjectivities within the lights/nights of a growing white nationalist public space.

As newfound jazz star, Iyer has had to negotiate many other racialized spaces. Iyer is routinely positioned as an outsider by the white mainstream jazz press. As Mari Yoshihara (2008) has written, Asian classical pianists are often valorized for their technical precision while denigrated for a lack of emotion. Similarly, Iyer's music is often characterized as "cerebral," "mathematical," and lacking the elusive "soul" central to black music. Fellow musicians have also been suspicious of the Brown jazz interloper. In a heavily trafficked Facebook post, white guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel assailed the Macarthur Genius for his lack of expressivity: "Well I guess I will be one who says it: Vijay Iyer is not a great pianist. sorry Vijay, nothing personal, but amongst the deluge of praise I must as a voice of the initiated be one who gives a counterbalance. No touch, no tone, no melody, nothing exceptional in any way. sorry, I'm not hating I'm just de-

glorifying. it's just not true. sorry" (V. Iyer 2018). Rosenwinkel then goes on to cite more "innovative" pianists such as Ethan Iverson, Brad Mehldau, and Esborn Svensson—white artists from a fairly "Eurological" school of jazz pianism (to use George E. Lewis' term). Using model minority tropes and Eurocentric aesthetic value systems, Rosenwinkel's comments differentiate Iyer from both the expressive white musician and feeling black jazz body. As "voice of the initiated," Rosenwinkel thus polices the boundaries of inclusion in a white jazz space in which Brown is both suspect and inaudible. In doing so, Iyer is relegated to the periphery of a racialized jazz teleology as both the fetishized and loathed object of critical desire. That the brief scuffle set off an online debate about Iyer's presence in the jazz pantheon speaks to the ambiguous and often undesirable presence of Brown in the post-9/11 world.

Iyer's unstable position in the jazz industry speaks to the shifting roles of South Asian Americans in the culture industry. Early Hollywood representations of Indians often utilized racist stereotypes of the comic outsider or mystic guru. The use of Brownface in films like *The Party* reinforced their perceived foreignness. Post-1965 depictions rely on similar model minority tropes. A new wave of young South Asian Americans actors and producers such as Mindy Kaling, Aziz Ansari, and Hassan Minhaj have challenged these demonizing representations through more diverse portrayals of Brown subjecthood. But their relatively scant presence in popular media is often motivated by liberal calls for diversity and inclusivity, particularly in a post-9/11 moment defined by Brown fetishism and reactionary tokenism. In a conference paper delivered at Yale University, Iyer described these trends as an "insidious embrace" of singular South

Asian characters, whose incorporation into the mainstream placates to whiteness through narratives of solitary Brown genius. Central to this narrative is what he calls the trope of the “Only Brown Person in the Room,” a “presence that neutralizes white guilt by its signaling of ‘diversity,’ while exhibiting zero allegiance to or investment in social justice” (2015: 4).

The trope of solitary Brown genius is conveniently mapped onto Iyer. Critics often overlook his more politicized projects such as *In What Language* (2003), Iyer and poet/MC Mike Ladd’s commentary on post-9/11 surveillance and the War on Terror. Iyer’s work with Thums Up, and collaborations with fellow South Asian American jazz musicians including Rudresh Mahanthappa and Rez Abassi are similarly off the jazz radar. Their multi-genre aesthetic might explain this critical omission. The industry continues to valorize “straight-ahead” styles based in narrow aesthetic definitions of jazz, as we heard in Rosenwinkel’s exclusionary attack. But for Iyer, these tendencies reflect more insidious trends. As he writes, “I see now that the projects that articulated any notion of community among diasporic South Asians... haven’t been nearly as insidiously embraced as the projects in which I’m the only South Asian in the room” (Ibid.).

These racialized tropes are heard in the reception of Iyer’s most successful project to date, the Vijay Iyer Trio. The long-standing group features white bassist Stephan Crump and African American drummer Marcus Gilmore, grandson of the legendary Roy Haynes. Their 2008 release *Historicity* landed Iyer firmly on the jazz radar. The group’s covers of Michael Jackson and M.I.A. fulfilled a newfound craze for reimagined pop hits. And the all-male trio signals “jazz” for a mainstream audience. But this critical praise

also plays into tropes of solitary Brown genius. Unlike the loud Brown voices of Thums Up, the group's interracial look and modern instrumental sound serve as an image of multicultural unity marketable in a post-9/11 world. Iyer is critically aware of this role. "Perhaps I am a token in my own band," he writes. "Or maybe I enact the trope of the solitary Brown overachiever/hustler" (Ibid.). In figure 2.1, we can see a press photo of the trio. The group stands in a tight linear formation against a stark black background and bright spotlight. They're edgy and serious, a hypermasculine vision of jazz coolness. Iyer's Brown face is partially obscured by a dark shadow but it is clear that he's in charge. Dressed in a hip pinstripe suite, Iyer's solitary presence is foregrounded in the viewer's spatial imagination. With just enough familiarity and foreignness, the group presents a model of what "America" is today.



Figure 2.2: Vijay Iyer Trio, image courtesy of Juan Hitters/ECM Records

Despite his numerous detractors, Iyer has become a powerful voice in the jazz and culture industry. He has used his success to open doors to emergent Brown voices. For

the last ten years, Iyer has served as artistic director of the Banff Institute for Creative Music, a summer workshop for aspiring improviser-composers. Iyer has also utilized his new position at Harvard to diversify the Eurocentric music curriculum and create space for artist-scholars of color, particularly queer and female. Iyer describes this work as “tearing down the fence.” As he writes, “you climb over the fence and you cut a hole in it, and let everyone else in. Who should be here? What ideas and music and subjects and individuals should be here that aren’t? And why aren’t they? And let’s make everyone deal with it” (Sriram 2016).

In the next section, I turn to Iyer’s role as music director for the 2017 Ojai Music Festival. The prestigious summer concert series is a beacon of European classical music, attracting a primarily white, upper-class audience, many of whom travel from across the country to attend the four-day summer program. Iyer’s Brown presence cut a hole in Ojai’s exclusionary fence. Using his privilege as musical curator, Iyer exposed audiences to a new kind of music making based in histories of black radicalism. Ojai’s liberal elite were open to this incursion. But the sounds of blackness often fell on deaf ears.

Black Absence and the Politics of Radical Chic

I am engulfed in a sea of white bodies. Many kneel with straight backs and eyes closed, deep in meditative stillness. Some perform yoga in the back of Libbey Park near a cluster of organic food trucks and makeshift stands selling local handicrafts. A woman in front of me scrolls through a ragged copy of *Lawrence of Arabia*. The east is near. I talk to a white woman who pronounces my name in an exaggerated Indian dialect like my father

would. “Dhirendra,” she says. She tells me about her long-time guru in Ojai. “We came to see the ‘Indian’ musicians,” the couple tells me.

Confluence takes the stage during the Sunday afternoon concert. The makeshift collective includes Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa alongside Indian classical icons Zakir Hussain and Aruna Sairam. In the program book, Artistic Director Tom Morris describes Sairam’s “mesmerizing voice,” heard during the 2016 festival. Dressed in crisp black and white suits, Iyer and Mahanthappa flank the senior masters, who sit cross-legged on a rectangular high rise in the center of the stage. An intergenerational confluence of Brown. A cluster of South Asian families sit on blankets strewn across the lawn; a spattering of Brown filling the black void. The group performs a set of improvised music spanning genre and geography. But the audience seems more captivated by the exotic and virtuosic display of Otherness. “Zakir,” the crowd chants. An understated tabla solo over a lilting six-beat cycle stirs the crowd. A father whispers to his young son, “Do you hear the drums?”

I sneak up to the main seating area during the break. Radical chic hippies in crocs, straw hats, and “Resist” buttons pinned on wool sweaters shuffle to their green metal folding chairs. A few Cal Arts jazz heads bob to the dense cross-rhythms. The band closes with Hussain’s playful composition “Punjab,” its groovy Dholakesq rhythm morphing into a quirky three-chord blues. Iyer plays rootsy blues licks against Hussain’s boogie-woogie bass lines. The crowd awkwardly keeps time. A blistering *tabla tihai* receives a standing ovation. Hussain pushes Iyer to the front of the stage as we erupt in applause. There’s a buzz after the show. “I love Indian music,” a fan remarks on my way

out. “They’re bringing in that Western thing,” his friend responds. I overhear someone mention Shakti, the Indo-jazz fusion group who brought Indian music to American audiences in the 1970s. I walk across Libbey Park and down Ojai’s main strip; Ritzy antique stores, tarot readers, and new age trinket shops line the Spanish colonial streets.

This brief vignette highlights a familiar strain of exoticism in which a predominantly white audience consumes diverse South Asian bodies and sounds through genealogies of orientalist listening. But this accessible brownness is marked by an overwhelming black absence. With the exception of clarinetist Eric Dolphy, who performed in the 1962 festival, the annual series has featured hardly any African American artists. Music directors have included some of the most celebrated figures in classical music including Igor Stravinsky, Pierre Boulez, Aaron Copland, and Esa-Pekka Salonen. The exclusive focus on Western European art music excludes artists of color and musical traditions outside the Eurocentric canon.

This black absence speaks to Ojai’s broader racialized geography. George Lipsitz has written about the “white spatial imaginary,” a conception of space based in privatization, homogeneity, and racial exclusivity. Unlike “black spatial imaginaries,” founded in shared public space and radical solidarity, “white spatial imaginaries” serve as a “locus for the generation of exchange value” that exclude minorities (2007: 15). Similarly, Ojai represents a decidedly “white spatial imaginary” through its commitment to homogenous space and racial exclusivity. Nestled between the Topatopa mountain range in central Ventura County and just east of Santa Barbara, Ojai is a beacon of whiteness. As of 2018, Ojai was 92% white, with a population of less than 2% Asian

Americans and .05% African Americans. Within this context, blackness is rendered invisible, its physical and sonic presence erased from Ojai's racialized topography.

In 2017, Artistic Director Tom Morris invited Iyer to serve as music director for the festival after Salonen turned down the position. Morris' replacement was surprising given the festival's racialized history. Yet Iyer also makes sense given Ojai's commitment to risk-taking new music. Iyer's performances at Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have granted him significant cultural capital and visibility amongst Ojai's elite demographic. Iyer's connection to black music and politics expands his appeal. Unlike conventional classical audiences, many Ojai fans have adopted more revolutionary sympathies. In his iconic essay in *New York Magazine*, "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's" (1970), journalist Tom Wolfe describes the espousal of radical politics amongst celebrities and socialites such as Leonard Bernstein, who often hosted members of the Black Panther Party during fundraising events at his Manhattan penthouse. Wolfe defines this new group as "radical chic," whose fashionable embrace of black radical politics assuages white guilt while disguising their investment in white supremacy. I don't mean to paint Ojai audiences in broad strokes. Each festival attracts new and diverse fans, and several audience members I met are long-standing proponents of African American creative music. Nonetheless, the particular configuration of Ojai's liberalism and affluence speaks to a distinct presence of radical chic aesthetic politics.

Ojai's long history of Indian fetishism seals Iyer's allure. The town was the inspiration for "Shangri-la," the fictional Tibetan monastery depicted in James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. A utopian mystique resonates in Ojai's idyllic natural

surroundings and destination as a spiritual retreat center. In 1927, a branch of the occult Theosophical Society was established in the Ojai Valley. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, nicknamed the “world teacher” by members of the society, made regular appearances in the region. Krishnamurti would later settle in Ojai, where he attracted a large following of white bohemian elite captivated by his intellectualized version of Indian spirituality. Popular artists and Hollywood celebrities including Aldous Huxley, Jackson Pollock, and Charlie Chaplin would often attend Krishnamurti’s weekly talks, and his alternative K-12 school and ranch house, preserved by the Krishnamurti Foundation of America, sit just a few miles from the festival grounds. California’s frontier spirit, new age ethos, and countercultural fetish of an imagined India ultimately frames a particular image of brownness in Ojai, based in an accessible yet novel spirituality. Today, boutique stores, tarot readers, and yoga studios dot the Spanish style arcade along the main strip, where the town’s overwhelmingly white population stroll in search of tranquility and the exotic. As Iyer described to me, Ojai’s audience “comes to expect the unexpected.”⁴⁰

I sit amongst an older white crowd during Iyer’s opening Ojai Talk. The event serves as an intimate meet and greet where audiences can get to know their resident music director. Iyer discusses the importance of community and his relation to blackness as a creative improviser. Moderator and Julliard School Dean Ara Guzmelian asks Iyer about his music’s purported “Indianness.” “I think we should be asking why the critics are such a homogenous bunch,” Iyer says with a slight smirk. The room falls silent.

⁴⁰ Vijay Iyer, interview with Dhiren Panikker, February 6, 2018.

Several awkwardly laugh. An older man whispers to his wife, “He means that critics are all white males.” *LA Times* music critic Mark Swed was in attendance that morning and commented on the encounter in his follow-up review entitled, “Vijay Iyer Jazzes up Ojai” (2017). “There is probably some truth to it,” he writes. “And he seems to know of which he speaks. The pressure for homogeneity has ever been an obstacle for progressive jazz musicians who attempt to collaborate with the classical world.” Swed seems to miss the point, falling back on narrow aesthetic divisions that pigeonhole Iyer as an interloper into Ojai’s classical (read: white) space. I later asked Iyer about his chilling, perhaps inaudible critique. “We find ourselves fretting and kind of parsing these utterances of various white men in power,” he tells me. “I just refuse to play that game.” Like Amiri Baraka’s (1967) trenchant critique of white jazz criticism, Iyer reframes tired discourses about his ethnic identity by highlighting the unmarked category of whiteness undergirding the racialized jazz industry. The whiteness of the crowd is painfully ironic.

Iyer’s subversive critique has become more explicit in recent years, particularly since the election of Donald Trump. During his residency at SF Jazz, Iyer tucked small postcard-sized flyers by Bay Area artist-activist Chiraag Bhakta into the back of each seat. One flyer featured the words “white supremacy,” crossed out against a stark black background and twelve stars of the confederacy (figure 2.1). Another reimagined Francis Scott Key’s iconic phrase, “land of the free, home of the brave,” from “The Star-Spangled Banner” (figure 2.2). Bhakta crosses out the first line, highlighting the false promise of freedom and the importance of collective agency in the face of a resurgent white nationalism. Similar images stream on a large screen behind the stage during Iyer’s

performance with Tirtha and duo concert featuring Rudresh Mahanthappa (figure 2.3).

On opening night, Iyer reminded the audience about the notes hidden in their seats. “This is just a special message for you,” he says rather nonchalantly. An older white couple beside me chuckles awkwardly.

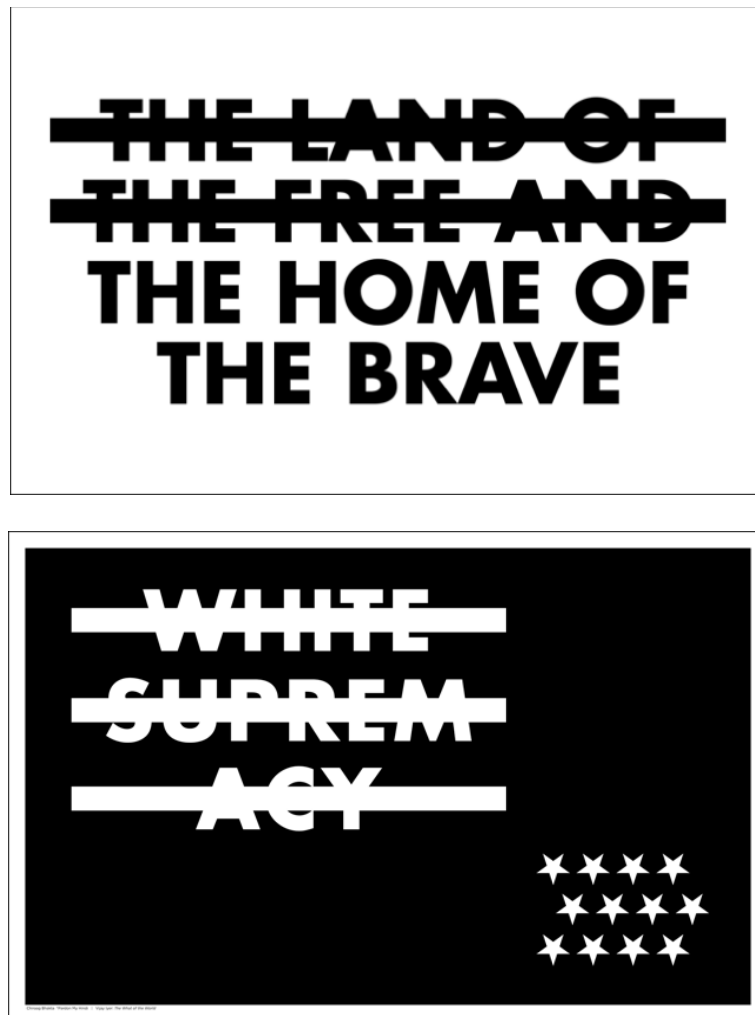


Figure 2.3: Chiraag Bhakta flyers, image courtesy of Chiraag Bhakta/*Pardon My Hindi



Figure 2.4: Iyer with Tirtha (top), image by Dhiren Panikker; Iyer and Mahanthappa (bottom), image courtesy of Chiraag Bhakta/*Pardon My Hindi

Bhatkta's flyers are strewn throughout the Ojai grounds and across the festival's digital sphere. But the immersive festival construct creates a more audible critique of white supremacy. During the Thursday afternoon concert, violinist Jennifer Koh performs the world premiere of Iyer's violin concerto, "Trouble," which references what Representative John Lewis described as the "good" and "necessary" strategies of Civil Rights activists. Clusters of sound and silence echo across the stretch of lawn as Koh's voice blurs in the orchestral mass. The work's cross-racial politics is amplified by a dedication to Vincent Chin, the Chinese American victim of a hate crime that reanimated Asian American activism in the early 1980s. Building on AIR's legacy, Iyer highlights the shared historical struggles linking African Americans and Asian Americans. The presence of black and Asian performers breathes immediacy and urgency into these creative calls for alliance.

But Iyer is wary of solidarity discourse. "I used to feel a kinship with African Americans as the child of postcolonial immigrants," he told me. "But I've come to realize that that's not the same as having your ancestors stolen and treated as property." Iyer is particularly suspicious of what he sees as a valorization of anecdotal moments of Black-Asian solidarity, such as the iconic image of activist Yuri Kochiyami holding Malcolm X's dying body. For Iyer, these brief instances—while important and inspiring—are unfortunate exceptions to the rule that elide structural difference.

Blackness is not the same thing as brownness. It's a completely different structural position because this culture we are in is founded on anti-blackness, and so the relation of a non-western immigrant to that dynamic is one of relative privilege. So, to force this narrative of black/Brown solidarity, when actually we just got here, and we're not descended from

people who were forcibly brought here and dehumanized—you know stripped of their status as person, as people, as humans... So, what's our relationship to that history? That's the real question for me, and that's a question that I'm always asking myself.⁴¹

Iyer's critique of a presumed alliance between African Americans and Asian Americans reflects his awareness of the pitfalls of a "people-of-colorblindedness." At the same time, his ambivalence doesn't preclude the possibility of solidarity. Iyer's rhetorical question, "what's our relationship to that history?" speaks to his interest in forging alternative relationalities to blackness without falling into the regressive claims to sameness plaguing many Afro Asian affiliations.

Iyer's tenure at Ojai represents some of these im/possibilities. While active as a performer-composer, Iyer played in just five of the eighteen concerts throughout the four-day program. Instead, he used his curatorial position to make space for diverse black artists and composers. Courtney Bryan featured her chamber world premiere of "Yet Unheard," a commemoration of Sandra Bland performed by prominent African American classical vocalists. The AACM had a considerable role in the festival, despite the surprising fact that artistic director Tom Morris hadn't heard of the pioneering figures of American music. George Lewis's West-coast premiere of "Afterward: An Opera," revived latent African American operatic histories through an all-black cast that retold the origins of the AACM. Lewis also joined saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell and the late pianist Muhal Richard Abrams for a trio concert and open roundtable on the history and ongoing impact of the AACM. A younger generation of AACM members also played a significant

⁴¹ Vijay Iyer, interview with Dhiren Panikker, February 6, 2017.

role in the festival. Drummer and composer Tyshawn Sorey performed as both a leader and sideman. His piece, “Conduction: Autoschediasms for Creative Chamber Orchestra” was inspired by Butch Morris’ conduction technique, in which musical parameters are manipulated through various gestures in an improvisatory setting.

Ronald Radano has written about the AACM’s embrace of modernism as a reaffirmation of “Africanist ideals” that “provided an artistic bulwark that reinforced their separatist defenses against the values and aesthetics of the jazz mainstream” (1992: 93). Similarly, the AACM’s modernist approach challenged narrow aesthetic conceptions plaguing jazz discourse. At the same time, their performance of European art music traditions (opera, chamber, etc.) challenged Ojai’s conception of what classical music might look and sound like. This intergenerational black presence was overwhelmingly male. But the presence of flutist and former AACM president Nicole Mitchell, along with Bryan and others, began to unsettle the gendered histories of the black avant-garde. Ultimately, this unwieldy assemblage disrupted Ojai’s white topography through a “black spatial imaginary” based in solidarity and radical collectivity.

In some ways, the Ojai Festival is a more inclusive environment that renders black voices audible. The outdoor landscape provides a degree of freedom in which musical sounds and bodies are no longer restricted by material boundaries. The open-air venue invites cross-racial encounters that blur the line between performer and audience. Blackened sounds flood across the open green lawn, through the trees, pouring into the wide suburban streets and down the main drag. In between shows, I wandered through “Rio Negro II,” an audio-kinetic installation by Douglas Repetto, George Lewis, and

Douglas Ewart, long-time members of the AACM. The title of the installation refers to the indigenous peoples of the Rio Negro basin in Northern Brazil—one of the largest blackwater rivers— as well as critical notions of blackness. The participatory exhibit was located in the center of Libbey Park, between the main stage and the merchants selling organic produce and local handicrafts in makeshift stands alongside Ojai Ave. Brightly colored bamboo rain sticks, resembling indigenous Native American instruments and the Afro-diasporic performance traditions of Ewart’s native Jamaica, rotate through motorized sensors responding to live movement. I walk along the circular wooded path, listening to the improvised contact between racialized bodies and objects. Dissonant drones converge with the grainy rhythms of seed and wood amidst ambient voices and the rustle of footsteps. Unlike mediated encounters with African American sounds, the kinetic sculptures respond to the listener’s presence in ways that facilitated a real-time engagement with blackness. In doing so, blackness is physically inscribed into the material, social, and aural landscape of Ojai’s white spatial imaginary.



Media 2.2: Rio Negro II soundwalk, recording by Dhiren Panikker

But even when black people are present, they often remain unseen. As Frank Wilderson argues, blackness represents a form of subjective, cartographic, and political absence whose void in the face of the fully present white gaze renders African Americans without value. As he argues, “Black presence is a form of absence, for to see a black is to see the Black, an ontological frieze that waits for a gaze rather than a living ontology

moving with agency in the field of vision... Blacks, then, void of Presence, cannot embody value, and void of perspectivity, cannot bestow value. Blacks cannot be. Their mode of being becomes the being of the No” (2008: 92).⁴² This black void expands when seen in relation to the Brown subject, who despite experiencing racialized exclusion, maintains internal coherence, presence, and value through structural advantage and claims to citizenship.

Blackness is similarly invisible within Ojai’s “white spatial imaginary,” a cartographic absence made audible in the erasure of African American performers and audiences throughout seventy years of the festival’s existence. The negligible historical presence of black artists—Eric Dolphy’s momentary appearance in 1962, for instance—represents an ontological frieze waiting for a white gaze to bestow conditional value in its voyeuristic spectatorship. Things have changed. Vijay Iyer introduced a radical blackness into Ojai’s liberal field of vision. This blackness was immersive, echoing on the stage and through the physical landscape. AACM voices were certainly appreciated by Ojai’s earnest radical chic. But their cartographic presence was overshadowed by the recent news of saxophonist and AACM founder Roscoe Mitchell’s dismissal from his decade-long position as Darius Milhaud Chair of Composition at Mills College. Thus, Mitchell’s visible presence on stage, amongst countless other African American artists, was denied by an institutional negation of black agency and value, particularly when seen against the security of Iyer’s recently tenured position at Harvard.

⁴² For more on the ontology of black absence, also see Gordon (2013).

A partial black presence was eclipsed through the fetishized consumption of Brown. As I described earlier, Confluence featured diverse South Asian performers and sounds, whose accessible brownness became the aural object of consumption for white listeners subsumed in orientalist genealogies of hearing. Despite cutting a hole in Ojai's racialized fence, Iyer's name remains forever etched in the festival's history of transcendent artists and composers. This aural black absence mediated by Brown presence also intersects with other strategic invisibilizing. Artifacts from the Barbareño-Ventureño Chumash—original inhabitants of the Ojai Valley—were recently discovered deep below Libbey Park, not far from the Rio Negro installation. The presence of Chumash artifacts at Ojai conceals the violent erasure of indigenous peoples, thus highlighting the linkages between anti-blackness and settler colonialism. A transcendent whiteness, what Deborah Wong (2004) describes as the “absent” yet ever-present body, lies just below this empty core, continuing to negotiate the terms of in/visibility.

Conclusion: A Movement in Relation

Iyer's story highlights the tensions and possibilities surrounding South Asian American improvisation in the post-9/11 era. His initial inaudibility in Asian Improv aRts reveals the limits of ethnicity in defining Asian American musical and political formations. Iyer's ultimate success, however, points to the reluctant inclusion of South Asian American artists in the most prestigious cultural institutions. He uses this privilege to form critical Brown community in contested white space. The Ojai Music Festival takeover brings these issues into stark relief. As I have shown, Iyer disrupts Ojai's racial politics by giving space to black artists in a collaborative setting grounded in histories of Afro Asian

encounter. But as I have argued, the hypervisibility of Brown also occludes the aurality of the black performing body. A radical chic spectatorship consumes this accessible brownness, thereby negating the aural presence of blackness despite its physical and sonic inscription within Ojai's "white spatial imaginary."

What follows the departure of blackness from Ojai? Are their liminal utterances destined for more permanent aural erasure? As Iyer described to me, it could be a "kind of hallucinatory vision that just dissipates." Indeed, the last two festivals have featured white music directors returning to works from the Eurocentric canon. But before I close, I want to meditate on the possibilities of hearing blackness through a brief reading of Iyer's work with trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith. This isn't meant to rewrite the inevitable absence of black sounds at Ojai and other late capitalist institutions. Rather, it is an effort to locate alternative ways of being and knowing through the intimacies of improvisation.

Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith was born in Mississippi in 1941, in the wake of the second Great Migration. In 1967, he became a leading member of the AACM, later forming the Creative Construction Company alongside Leroy Jenkins and Anthony Braxton. Smith has been immersed in cross-cultural musical exploration, studying various non-Western instruments including the koto, kalimba, and Ghanaian bamboo flute, in addition to the trumpet and flugelhorn. He also pioneered "Ankhrasmation," an alternative form of graphic notation that draws on Egyptian philosophical traditions and symbolic systems. I met Smith once after a duo concert with Iyer at SF Jazz. He plays and speaks with an intensity that belies his age and quiet demeanor. Being in his presence reveals a distinct sense of the sacred.

Iyer and Smith first played together in the late 1990s in San Francisco, while Iyer was busy constructing his own musical identity in collaboration with AIR.⁴³ From 2005-2010, Iyer served as a core member in Smith's acclaimed Golden Quartet, performing on a string of world tours and live recordings. During a pre-concert talk on the Ojai Festival tennis courts, Iyer and Smith described the embodied nature of these early encounters. As Iyer recalled, the entire ensemble would often drop out, leaving the two artists in a sparse, ritualistic duo space. For Smith, this format provided an aural economy that stimulated musical intimacy. "Duet music gives you that really close connection without other sounds coming in," he said. "You know what's there. It's two partners. You can easily merge together with two people; to have it merge as a single wave or a single voice with multiple elements in it."⁴⁴

These relational sensibilities are imbued throughout Iyer and Smith's duo record, *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke* (2016). Emerging from several performances at the Banff Jazz Workshop, the album was inspired by and dedicated to the late artist Nasreen Mohamaddi, whose non-representational drawings ushered a new movement in Indian modernism. The album was recorded at Avatar studio in New York City in October 2015, under the prestigious German label ECM. As Iyer recalled, producer Manfred Eicher asked Smith and Iyer to play something for a soundcheck. Without a score or pre-determined musical structure, they simply began playing. "And then we just came together and made it," he said. "That's what you hear, us making it" (Ibid.).

⁴³ For more on Wadada Leo Smith, see Gopal (2016) and Porter (2002).

⁴⁴ Wadada Leo Smith and Vijay Iyer, concert talk, June 7, 2017.



Figure 2.5: Iyer and Smith, image courtesy of John Rogers/ECM Records

I move into the Ojai Music Festival’s main stage band shell to be closer to their sound. The music is quiet and internal, two partners moving together. Smith stands at a distance from Iyer, often crouching forward with his eyes closed and trumpet bell pointing downward. The audience is still. “Passage” opens with sparse Rhodes tines buzzing with heavy delay. Smith enters with muted long tones against rising arpeggios and fuzzy bass notes that ebb and shape his grainy trumpet sound. The piece depicts various passages: the passage of the soul, the Middle Passage, the passage of Syrian immigrants fleeing genocide. Form emerges through improvised fragments of sound. Smith oscillates between high, cracked pitches and rapid flourishes that intersect with Iyer’s chordal undercurrent. They seem to be both following and leading one another through dense sonic territories that build and fall in the same instant. Iyer plays relentless punctuated chords in the low register that slowly shift in tonality and texture as he moves

to the piano. Smith follows by removing his mute, filling the dissonant space with rapid runs and pregnant silences. Iyer joins with chaotic flourishes across the entire keyboard, their voices moving in dissonant parallel before suddenly shifting into open harmonies over a phasing electronic drone in D minor.

Midway through the set, Iyer cues a sample from Malcolm X's iconic 1965 speech at the Ford Auditorium, his last public appearance before being killed a week later. Malcolm's voice slowly unfolds over a spacious C drone and the natural sounds of crickets in the Ojai night. "I believe in Islam. I am a Muslim. And there's nothing wrong with being a Muslim, nothing wrong with the religion of Islam. It just teaches us to believe in Allah as the God." Smith plays long triadic trumpet shapes that almost cover Malcolm X's rapid-fire baritone voice, whose powerful monologue on religion, race, and racism is given urgency through delay and spatialization. "When they start indicting us because of our color that means we're indicted before we're born, which is the worst kind of crime that can be committed."

On what would be their final piece, "Divine Courage," Smith plays deeper into the floor, almost folding into himself. Cyclic chords build and rumble, holding Smith's fragmented screeches and swung blues lines before resolving to a serene C minor. Smith stops. Iyer continues alone with descending octaves and low bass figures that fade into a long stillness. After the set, Iyer and Smith embrace—they often meet and hug each other at the center of the stage before recognizing the audience. But this time, Smith's knees buckle. His body collapses into Iyer's outstretched arms. "Is there a doctor in the house," someone shouts. A distressed Iyer holds his seventy-six-year-old mentor before

paramedics wheel him off the stage from what we later discover was the result of dehydration from the toll of constant travel and Ramadan fasting. We watch in shock and awe. As Iyer recalled, Smith called him from the hospital later that night to thank him for a beautiful concert, apologizing that he couldn't continue playing. On my way out, I talk with a group of Cal Arts students concerned for their esteemed teacher. Hope and love are audible amidst the sound of panicked voices and sirens in the distance. The Ojai Festival marketing team cut this scene from the official YouTube footage, erasing its tragic possibilities from the archival record.

“After its performance is over is when music is heard,” Fred Moten writes. “Air returned to air, aspire, expire. Music lies before and up ahead of its performance as subsistence, persistence, lingering, and sounded remainder in the breach, in the movement, from and between” (2003: 81). In the break between sound and silence is where the music began for me. I don't remember every note that Iyer and Smith played that night. But I will never forget that tragic fall; the panic in Iyer's eyes, his loving arms, our concerned watching. It still gets me now. In some ways, Iyer's reaction was something that we all would do in a time of crisis. But that moment of frantic grasping resonates with other moments of embrace. I'm reminded of the 1965 photo of Yuri Kochiyama holding Malcolm X's limp body in her lap after his assassination. That gentle embrace, overdetermined as it might be, suggests another kind of intimacy. “Please Malcolm... stay alive,” Kochiyama said before he passed. The urgency of her voice speaks within and yet beyond the flawed rubric of Afro Asia, and not toward a liberal state of colorblind oneness. Like Iyer and Smith's sonic embrace through improvised

sound, these moments reveal a liminal subsistence, a persistent lingering in the “breach,” a movement in relation at the interstices of social life/death that haunts black (and Brown) bodies (bodied) in the ruptures of post-9/11.

Deborah Wong warns us about the risks of reading trauma, a “dynamic loop of witness and voyeurism” in which participants become caught in “spectacularized acts of looking... and hearing” (2004: 272). Our spectacularized looking during Smith’s collapse walks this critical tight rope. My narrative recollection also has the potential to reproduce its violent absence in textual permanency. I don’t want to fetishize black suffering or conflate Smith’s momentarily fainting with Malcolm X’s violent murder. But these distinct moments do speak to each other. Smith’s Muslim faith and grounding in African American creative music place him firmly in the history of black radicalism activated by Malcolm X. And the black leader’s powerful voice, however disembodied, did literally speak that night from the world beyond. Iyer isn’t Kochiyama in so many ways. And yet, his ongoing commitment to black music and racial justice suggests a similar investment in the precarious hope of Afro Asia. Both cases reveal a friendship, a holding, a listening, a collective desire to stay alive in the face of un/certain absence. As Keith Feldman (2011) argues, this tenuous relation to blackness is defined as much by a “when” than a “what.” Its power lies in its futurity, of “hosting forms of relation yet to come.”

Chapter 3

Listening Beneath the Grain: South Asian American Performance and the (Re)production of Brownvoice

In May 2015, vocalist Priya Gopal publicly released a studio recording of her translated version of George Gershwin’s classic “Summertime,” entitled “Nithākam.”⁴⁵ The video was circulated widely and led to a prominent jazz label expressing interest in “obtaining [her] unique take on the same old standards.”⁴⁶ The record label was known for its early recordings of race records, which marketed “ethnic” music to various communities, particularly African Americans between the 1920s and 1940s. Recently, they have rebranded themselves as a jazz label focused on contemporary and cross-cultural styles. Gopal’s work fit nicely into this new global market. Her debut album features arrangements of old Indian texts and jazz standards translated in Tamil. But Gopal’s niche sound proved difficult to sell. As the label began to lose confidence in their ability to market and distribute the album, the production company decided to create new content in the form of high-quality music videos.⁴⁷

“Invocation” opens with Gopal’s face and embroidered shawl shining against a single spotlight and black backdrop. The camera slowly pans across her glistening Brown

⁴⁵ “Priya Gopal” is a pseudonym for the actual singer. For personal and professional reasons, she has asked me to remove her real name to preserve anonymity.

⁴⁶ Priya Gopal, interview by Dhiren Panikker, April 3, 2017.

⁴⁷ As of 2018, Gopal was still working closely with the record label and wasn’t comfortable revealing their name. Out of an ethical contract with her, I have redacted the label’s name and any other identifying information.

skin, zooming in on the *mudras* (symbolic hand gestures) and wooden prayer beads draped across her neck. Gopal's heavily reverbed voice emerges above the meditative stillness of a piano drone. Percussive attacks from dampened piano strings provide interesting contrast but are obscured by the close stills of Gopal's face, lips, and closed eyes. The camera focuses on Gopal's hands as she mimics the *tanpura*-like bass ostinato between her fingers. The accompanying musicians are heard but not seen. The video ends with a strategic, long cut profile of Gopal staring longingly into the camera as the image fades to black. The spectacle of intimacy with the Other is visceral. We consume the Brown body and voice.

This brief video highlights the raced and gendered construction of the South Asian voice. Drawing on orientalist tropes of the exotic and erotic, these sono-visual representations present a new Brown voice to a global jazz audience hungry for novel authenticity. In this chapter, I examine the racialization of the South Asian female voice through an ethnographic analysis of Priya Gopal's experience in the jazz world. Several Brown singers have emerged on the jazz and creative music scene in recent years including Shilpa Ananth, Aditya Prakash, Arooj Aftab, and Roopa Mahadevan. I chose Gopal's unique story out of a love of her multivocal sound and what it can tell us about the messy politics of race and gender in post-9/11 jazz. I ask these questions: How do representations of South Asians in popular media and song influence the way Brown voices are heard in other performative spaces? How does the act of listening contribute to the erasure of Brown voices and subjectivities? How do collective forms of improvisation create new spaces to hear the Brown voice-in-relation? In dialogue with recent

scholarship in critical voice studies and Black studies, I argue that the Brown female voice represents a contested site of symbolic gendered racial violence.

I begin by interrogating the role of the voice in discourses on jazz and world music, particularly in relation to blackness. I expand on Shilpa Davé's (2013) construct of "brownvoice" by considering the sonic dimensions of Indian vocal representation in popular film and music throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Next, I examine Gopal's vocal training within Indian classical and folk traditions, as well as the issues of translation and mimesis surrounding her transition into the commercial jazz world. Through a close reading of her experience in the recording studio, I theorize what I call *sonic auto-mimicry*, the subaltern's aural (re)production of racialized self.⁴⁸ I close by considering the utopian potential of communal Brown singing. I narrate my own affective listening experience during Gopal's performance at Brooklyn Raga Massive, a non-profit collective focused on South Asian creative practice and community building. I highlight the construction of a queer, interracial space of Brown belonging that rewrites the violence of brownvoice through the intimacy of collective song. In doing so, I follow Lindon Barrett and Farah Jasmine Griffin's (2004) search for alternative conceptions of the voice as a "site of the active production of meaning" (Barrett 1999: 76). In short, I deploy an intersectional analysis to hear Gopal in radical new ways.

What follows is a dialogic process of reinscription. My earlier drafts of this chapter were quite detached and objective. In retrospect, I was trying to maintain distance

⁴⁸ My use of the term (re)production refers to the process in which race and gender are continually mapped and remapped onto the body through the performative act of vocalization and listening.

from Gopal because of our gendered relationship. I also wasn't prepared for the emotional and ethical challenges of writing about trauma. In seeking more sustainable ethnographic relationships, I worked closely with Gopal throughout the editing process. In July 2017, I emailed her a working draft of the chapter. She sent back a long copyedit, fixing various biographical and factual errors. She filled in several footnotes with a long list of *Karnatik* teachers she studied with, revealing a much deeper lineage than I had imagined. Interestingly, she also began editing her own voice by changing, adding, even omitting words from our interviews. Many scholars might have flagged these as "her" words to preserve the objective distance between subject and analyst. In keeping with a more collaborative space of knowledge production, I left this text in-tact, blurring the lines between our entangled voices. In one case, I inserted a long block quote from an interview in which Gopal described the subjective violence inflicted on her voice. The experience was personal and traumatic. Gopal added the word "yet" to the end of the sentence; "I don't know how to undo it *yet*." The addition of this rather insignificant modifier was an agentic move; it revealed Gopal's desire to restore a voice taken away. I hope this kind of decolonial writing provides a space for us both to speak in a more collaborative and loving way through our many differences.

Constructing Brownvoice

Voice is one of the most common tropes in Western discourse. It is often imagined as the unmediated site of self-expression; the primordial gateway to the soul. This understanding of the voice emerges through conceptions of the individual constituting Western subjectivity. As Martin Daugherty has written, the voice represents a myth of

Enlightenment liberalism constructed around metaphors of presence, essence, and agency. Within this framework, “your voice asserts that: (1) you are a unique, autonomous individual (i.e., it asserts your presence); (2) you are a rational being capable of knowing and communicating your needs and desires (i.e., you are in touch with your essence); and (3) you have the power to act according to your individual wishes (i.e., you have agency)” (2012: 7). This “voice-presence-agency” metaphor “presents you to yourself as an autonomous, rational, and empowered individual—despite any evidence of the contrary” (Ibid.). At the same time, vocality is a site for the construction of difference. Its liberatory potential is central to one’s resistance against dominant political structures, especially for the subaltern. As Steven Feld and Aaron Fox argue, “this is no doubt why phrases like “giving voice,” “taking voice,” “having voice” are so linked to the politics of identity, to the ability of the subaltern to speak, to the ability of indigeneity movements to “talk back” and class, gender, and racial politics “back talk” to the dominant (1999: 161). Indeed, the absence of voice signals the most violent loss of subjecthood for the dispossessed.

The South Asian voice occupies a peculiar role in the Western popular imagination. It is often positioned in the ancient past through orientalist imaginings of India as the site of primality and spiritualism. As Vijay Prashad (2000) argues, these tropes spread through a lineage of “godmen,” whose mystical voices encircled the Hollywood film industry as early as the 1920s. This exotic Indian voice was later consumed by post-war hippie youth and “new age orientalists” seeking individual transcendence amidst economic instability and a purported spiritual vacuity in the west.

Around the same time, popular films such as *The Party* (1967), featuring Peter Sellers, depicted caricatured images of South Asians for a mainstream American public hungry for exotic authenticity. Sellers’ unabashed use of brownface as the bumbling Indian film star Hrundi Bakshi was key to the hit film’s insidious humor.⁴⁹

But the focus on visuality ignores the auditory dimension of brownface performance. As Shilpa Davé argues, *The Party* and other mainstream Hollywood films often utilize a form of “South Asian accent,” or “an amalgamation of the practice of brown voice (performance of Indian vocal accent) and brownface (wearing clothes or makeup to look Indian)” (2013: 3). These cliché vocal and sartorial “accents” combine in a sono-visual depiction of naïve Otherness. Moreover, they reflect what Davé calls “brownvoice,” a racial performative of affected English that “reinforces a static, racialized position for South Asian Americans regardless of their status or occupation in the United States” (ibid.: 41). Brownvoice thus constructs an aural picture of the familiar yet perpetually foreign Brown subject consumable for a mass, white listening public. This monolithic vocality is then (re)produced in shows such as the *Simpsons* and the recent film, *The Love Guru* (2008)—mimetic performances that have become the standard of what brownness should look and sound like.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Sellers was also known to don brownface off set while walking around Indian cities, thus giving new meaning to this troubling racial performative (Davé 2013).

⁵⁰ Voice actor Hank Azaria used Sellers’ early vocal performances as the basis for his depiction of Apu, the animated Indian character from the *Simpsons*. Interestingly, my father and I have both adopted Sellar’s iconic line, “howdy partner,” mimicking his affected Indian accent during family gatherings as a kind of self-conscious brownvoice performative; a fugitive irony given our South Asian American identities.

An emphasis on vocal accent occludes the role of other sonic variables in the construction of brownvoice. In music, ideas about the South Asian voice have been shaped through Indo-rock fusions of the late 1960s. Released only one year before *The Party*, “Within you Without you,” from the Beatles celebrated album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Heart Club Band* (1967), features vocal, musical, and textual markers of Indianness inspired by the group’s fascination with Eastern spirituality. While George Harrison’s vocal line doesn’t employ the strict microtonal accents and ornamentation indicative of Indian Classical music, his timbral and melodic nuances signal the song’s Brown vocality. His vocal timbre and static dynamic shape create a drone-like soundscape in keeping with Western notions of India as a site of mystery. Harrison’s melodic line also utilizes a mixolydian scale, whose characteristic flatted seventh reduces the sense of harmonic movement while approximating Hindustani *ragas* such as *Khamaj Thaat*. This melodic framework creates an identifiable tritone interval (E-Bb) that enhances the spiritual dissonance expressed through Harrison’s lyrics of transcendence and utopian individualism. These exoticized vocals are enhanced by recognizable Indian classical instruments including the *tabla* and *sitar*, as well as the imitative and ornamented melodic lines of the *sarangi* and *dilruba*, a fretless lute used in Bengali devotional music. Three *tambura* drones create an unusually buzzy vibrational space that amplifies the Indian aesthetic, while the use of British Indian studio musicians adds to the track’s perceived authenticity. Thus, the imagined brownvoice is constructed through sonic and linguistic markers of Indianness in ways that reinforced orientalist fascinations with the east and mobilized a rebellion of white, middle-class values during the iconic

Summer of Love—an irony given the arrival of actual South Asians following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act just two years earlier.

1970's Indo-jazz fusions have similarly aided in the construction of brownvoice. But rather than melody and timbre, rhythm becomes the primary marker of Indianness. Groups such as Shakti, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, and The Hindustani Jazz Sextet performed primarily instrumental compositions inspired by Indian Classical music.⁵¹ Shakti often used *konnokal*, a South Indian vocal performance practice that mimics the rhythmic and tonal qualities of Indian percussion through a set of pneumonic syllables and hand gestures. In the early 2000s, these vocal styles became a viral phenomenon through popular YouTube videos. These videos depict predominantly white, male jazz drummers translating the complex vocal patterns of the Indian voice to the drum set, often accompanied by sidebar clips of the original South Asian singers and scrolling transcriptions set in Western notation. These videos have led to a renewed fetish for the Indian voice amongst niche jazz hipsters. But unlike Harrison's mystical brownvoice, they use the disembodied South Asian voice as raw material for the expression of virtuosic instrumental performance in keeping with gendered jazz and rock aesthetics. The use of non-textual syllables aligns with conceptions of the South Asian voice as a site of both foreignness and familiarity. Without the burden of linguistic meaning, they

⁵¹ Interestingly, The Hindustani Jazz Sextet's cliché fusion songs such as "Bombay Bossa Nova," were released around the same time as both *The Party* and "Within You, Without You," thus highlighting the sonic construction of India across mediated genres.

ultimately (re)produce the imagined brownvoice as a static and consumable product digestible for the modern jazz listener.

Brownvoice can thus be defined as a sono-racial performative and mediating force based in orientalist genealogies of listening that shapes the way we see and hear South Asian voices in various musical spaces. This framework considers not only the act of performance and representation but the importance of audition to the raced and gendered construction of particular bodies and vocal timbres. After all, “it is the context of the listening or the hearing,” as Farah Jasmine Griffin reminds us, “that embodies the voice with meaning” (2004: 111). Through this lens, we have a fuller sonic picture of how South Asian voices are constructed and consumed across divergent cultural spaces. I don’t mean to conflate the imagined brownvoice with the embodied voices of South Asian artists, a critical slippage that might unintentionally minimize the embodied humanity of the singers themselves. Nor do I want to fetishize the “actual” South Asian voice as an unmediated site of authenticity. Doing so would only fall into the same metaphoric tropes of presence and essence that define the individual voice of Enlightenment liberalism. Rather, I focus on how the mediating practice of brownvoice is both (re)produced and contested by South Asian singers engaged in traditions of black radical music making. How is the brownvoice heard against and in relation to the black singing voice, one of the most fraught sites of racial and gendered signification? Before exploring Gopal’s emergence in the jazz industry, I briefly explore the construction of the black voice within and outside the Western imagination.

The African American voice remains the quintessential Other, an incommensurable site of racial signification. Unlike the South Asian voice—devalued and perhaps subhuman, yet privileged—the black voice is marked by its connection to the inhuman and disposable black body. As Farah Jasmine Griffin argues, “the black voice is part of the black body,” a “body deemed the very antithesis of all that was white and therefore human” (2004: 106). Drawing on Roland Barthes notion of the “grain” or the “body in the singing voice” (1977), Nina Eidsheim theorizes the relationship between the black body and voice through the concept of “acousmatic blackness,” or the “existence of the black body through sonic nuances designated as African-American vocal timbre” (2008: 24).⁵² As she argues, “acousmatic blackness is devised to evidence physiological differences between races—differences that do not exist in the material measurable world. However, African-American vocal timbre and acousmatic blackness do exist due to the belief in racial difference and due to collectivized subjective perceptions of difference through sound” (ibid.: 24). “The black, racialized body,” as Eidsheim argues, “is inserted into the voice of the African-American singer, whose instrument thus is trapped by sonically limited historical racial categories” (ibid.: 99).

The African American female singing voice is particularly shaped by “acousmatic blackness.” As Griffin argues, the black female voice represents a “mythical source of black modernity” that is simultaneously marked by impurity through its connection to the inhuman black body, while frozen in an authentic myth of origin (2004: 113). In jazz

⁵² Eidsheim borrows the term “acousmatic blackness” from Mendi Obadike (2005).

discourse, black female voices are constructed as primitive sites of an idealized jazz past. As Lara Pellegrinelli has written, they are often seen as “static, unchanging products of the human body,” and thus relegated to an inferior social space located at the origins of a gendered jazz creation myth (2008: 40). Feminized nineteenth-century vocal forms such as the blues, gospel spirituals, and field hollers are viewed as static precursors to the supposed progressive and masculine instrumental forms that have occupied most historiographical attention. This critical oversight not only erases black female voices but “gives exclusive control over the music and sexuality to men, enabling them to contain the singing body” (ibid.: 43).⁵³

The female South Asian singer is similarly trapped by the markings of brownvoice. While not equivalent to the inhumanity of blackness, her voice is imagined as a static product of the Brown body that can be controlled and silenced. This voice is thus marked by what I call *acousmatic brownness*, in which the exoticized and eroticized Brown female body is embedded into the grain of the South Asian voice. Like its black counterpart, *acousmatic brownness* traps the actual South Asian voice through historical racial categories and essentialized connections between racialized bodies and sounds. As we will see later, Gopal’s embodied voice is not only contained by *acousmatic brownness* but inscribed and erased by the symbolic gendered racial violence that constitutes global jazz production and listening.

⁵³ For more on the erasure of women from jazz, see Tucker (2000) and Rustin and Tucker (2008).

Black radical forms of improvisation can elicit new understandings of the voice and its fugitive potentials. During chattel slavery, African Americans utilized expressive cultural practices to subvert dominant power structures that attempted to manage their bodies and voices. Work songs, spirituals, and other forms of black expressive singing became an indirect yet powerful tool of collective struggle.⁵⁴ But the black voice is more than a site of cultural survival and resistance. Rather, Afro-diasporic vocal forms contest dominant Western value systems through a radical blurring of speech and song. This hybrid vocality is audible in a genealogy of black vocal practices from the ring shout to gospel preaching, scat singing, and hip hop. Scat singing disturbs Western melodic structure and linguistic meaning through its seemingly meaningless, yet powerfully allusive and rhythmically poetic manipulations of the voice. As Katherine Biers argues, these alternative vocal forms constitute a new black voice, one that “becomes fugitive, compensating in the linguistic and musical register for the violent stasis imposed by slavery and its legacies” (2006: 100).

But these fugitive voices do even more. For Nathaniel Mackey, the alternative vocalities embedded in the “black musicians stutter” reveal a “telling inarticulacy” consistent with a “critique of predatory coherence...and the articulacy that upholds it” (1993: 252–53). This critique of articulacy unsettles privileged forms of literacy and value, what Lindon Barrett calls “the self-evident sign of Western mastery and Afro-diasporic lack” (1999: 77). Barrett locates this radical propensity in the black “singing

⁵⁴ For more on African American music and song, see Floyd Jr. (1996), Floyd Jr., Zeck, and Ramsey (2017), Southern (1997), and Stuckey (1987).

voice,” an “African American cultural artifact” that “refuses” the “basis for Western systematic thought,” and which he distinguishes from the Western “signing” voice, or speech, the “originary self-presence that the technology of literacy aims to recover, fix, and represent” (ibid.: 76-78). This semantic move positions the black voice within, yet outside and counter to, Western conceptions of the voice that attempt to contain its speech and meaning through racialized scripts of primitivity and orality.⁵⁵ For Barrett, this process marks a “counterliteracy” that disturbs Western “economies of the voice,” and ultimately, categories of the human, by culling new meaning for the black subject in the New World. As Barrett argues,

Singing voices mark counter presences, countercultures, and counterliteracies so that, as opposed to the signing voice, they compose the primary legacy of African diasporic populations. Singing (even its spelling lyrically disturbs “sign/signing”) remains, one might say, a peculiarly African American possession in New World landscapes. In the same way they constitute acoustic disturbances, singing voices announce a crisis in New World economies of voice—New World economies of the sign, rationality, racial genius, as well as psychic and social agency. In their disturbance of the already scripted significance of signing voices and of literacy, singing voices reopen the very issue of making sense in the New World (ibid.: 83).

Thus, at stake is not that black voices are devoid of value, but that “African Americans must pursue novel or original access to meaning, voice, value, and authority” (ibid.: 80-81). How does this radical pursuance of alternative meaning and being open up new ways of seeing and hearing the postcolonial Brown voice, a somewhat precious commodity whose diminished value is bestowed in so far as it speaks the whitened

⁵⁵ For more on the black singing voice and phonography, see Weheliye (2002).

language of model minority success? I want to suggest that Brown singing voices can mark similar “counter presences” and “acoustic disturbances” that announce a crisis in post-9/11 economies of voice. Black radical forms of improvisation offer one medium through which this fugitive voice might resonate anew. Before tracing this uneven confluence, I discuss Priya Gopal’s multilingual training in the South Asian vocal arts and her entry into the racially fraught site of the commercial jazz industry.

Born to Spread Music

I met with Gopal at a local coffee shop near downtown Los Angeles. She was on tour with the bhangra-fusion band Red Baraat and only in town for a couple of days. I told her that the first time we met I noticed her reading *Autobiography of a Yogi*, the cult story of Paramahansa Yogananda’s spiritual journey to the West. She said that it might have been Charlotte Brontë’s classic *Jane Eyre*. Gopal found the novel beautiful but somewhat alienating, like her experience in the jazz world. “This is an expression that was not made for my people, of my people, by my people,” she told me. “I will never be able to truly understand it.” At the same time, Gopal relates to the story’s main character. She described a scene where Eyre was asked if she would leave her abusive home to live with a more loving family, to which Eyre replied, “I’m not sure if I’m willing to trade caste for comfort.” Gopal was struck by this line. It seemed to embody her political encounters as a diasporic Indian American caught in the crosshairs of gender and caste politics and shifting notions of home and belonging.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Gopal, April 2017.

Gopal was born in New York City to a Tamil Brahmin family in 1991. She was immediately selected to lead a musical life. In fact, she was destined. Her name literally means “the one who was born to spread music.”⁵⁷ Gopal’s family has deep roots in the Karnatik music world. Most of her father’s family are professional Karnatik musicians and dancers. Her grandmother, Kalaimamani Smt. Seetha Gopal (1926-2013), was a prominent Karnatik musician who pioneered the *jalatharangam*, a unique instrument comprised of tuned ceramic or metal bowls filled with water that is rarely performed. Seetha Gopal remains the first and still youngest female artist to receive the prestigious Gold Medal of Honor from the Music Academy of Chennai.

Gopal’s studies began at an early age. Gopal’s parents brought her to Florida when she was three years old to acclimate to the humidity before moving to India to begin formal musical training. At seven years old, Gopal moved to a small village with family ties in the Tenkasi District of Shenkottai in the Southern state of Tamil Nadu, where she was later homeschooled. She began learning the Tamil language and Brahmin way of life in order to assimilate and increase her mobility as a Non-Resident Indian (NRI). Gopal later moved to Chennai, the urban heart of Karnatik music, where she began intense training in the South Indian Classical arts. Like many serious students, she learned a variety of instruments including the veena, harmonium, and *jalatharangam*, thus continuing in her grandmother’s legacy of gendered intervention in male instrumental performance. Gopal spent most of her time studying *Bharatanatyam* dance

⁵⁷ See footnote 44 (page 94) on anonymity.

under her cousin and guru, Smt. Radhika Ganesh.⁵⁸ But after a serious leg injury, she shifted her focus to vocal studies under K. R. Jaisankar, a singer in a prestigious genealogy of Karnatik arts.⁵⁹

At her mother's insistence and design, Gopal began her studies in the *gurukulum* tradition, a pedagogical system in which a student lives near or in the teacher's home. The training was rigorous. Gopal would wake up early in the morning to begin several hours of vocal lessons before going to school. After returning home, she would resume music and dance classes late into the evening. We can see this musical intensity in figure 3.1, a snapshot of the Gopal family rehearsing at their home in Kottivakkam. A young Gopal is framed by the percussive accompaniment of her brother Vignesh on *mridangam*, and her grandmother, strumming the *tambura* drone that binds their familial sound.⁶⁰ This snapshot highlights what Matthew Rahaim describes as the "musicking body," or "a trained body in action, engaged mindfully in singing and/or playing an instrument" (2012: 143). But it also reveals the labor of both musicking and listening bodies; Seetha smiling self-consciously into the camera as Priya and Vignesh sit in deep musical thought with their heads tilted downward and slightly askance, absorbing the entangled sound of

⁵⁸ Gopal cataloged many Bharatanatyam hand gestures in the unpublished educational text, *Rasam for the Dancers Soul* (2011).

⁵⁹ Smt. Radhika Ganesh is the senior-most student of Smt. Ambika Buch, who is greatly respected in the dance community on account of being one of the remaining original students of Kalakshetra founder Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale. Gopal was Ganesh's senior-most student, thus belonging to an elite group of dancers. Jaisankar was in a long lineage of Karnatik singers. He was an accomplished senior student of Kalaimamani Sri Vairamangalam Lakshminarayan who in turn studied under Tandalam Krishnamachari Rangachari, one of the foremost vocal exponents of Karnatik music (Priya Gopal, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, July 15, 2017).

⁶⁰ The *mridangam* is a double-headed South Indian drum used in Karnatik music.

voice and drum with open ears. Years later, this embodied musical intimacy would sustain Gopal through some of her most traumatic moments in the jazz world.⁶¹



Figure 3.1: Gopal with her brother and grandmother, image courtesy of Priya Gopal

Karnatik music remains an elite space reserved for higher caste Brahmins. Gopal's family shielded her from Bollywood music and other perceived commercially tainted forms. But she was also exposed to a tradition of devotional singing known as *harikatha*. Gopal began learning *abhangs*, or thirteenth to seventeenth- century spiritual

⁶¹ Gopal, April 2017.

poems from the Central Indian state of Maharashtra.⁶² The heart of the *varakari* *sampradaya* tradition of *harikeertan* singing, *abhangs* are most often sung during long temple pilgrimages to the city of Pandharpur, a holy village on the banks of the Bhima river in the Solapur district of Maharashtra. Unlike the controlled qualities of Karnatik music and inward nature of devotional *bhajan* singing, *abhangs* express a more exuberant, communitarian experience through collective singing, coarse vocal timbres, and anti-caste lyrics. Devotees often sit and tell stories together, even cry together (Ibid.).

Gopal's mother was one of the first managers of *abhang* singers, which provided her an opportunity to perform and tour with them. In the late 1990s, she joined the Vishwa Varakari Parivar troupe of Sri Tukaram Ganapathi Maharaj, who popularized the *varakari* tradition amongst urban Tamil Brahmins. In fact, Gopal bore witness to their first meetings at her own home.⁶³ In figure 3.2, we can see an amplified Gopal seated cross-legged alongside Maharaj and a small percussion ensemble. I imagine her voice echoing through grainy speakers and across the makeshift performance space, meshing in the ears of eager devotees, and the Brahmin elite entranced by the subversive sounds of the pious folk.

⁶² More recently, *abhangs* have been introduced into the Karnatik repertoire as a light classical or folk respite from the heaviness of more “serious” ragas. Gopal's current PhD research explores the caste-based tensions at the heart of this musical confluence.

⁶³ The then-nascent movement has since blossomed into what is now known as Vishwa Varakari Samasthan, a movement with a global following. Ganapathi played a large role in the popularization of *abhangs* within Tamil Brahmin circles, particularly in the *sabhas*, or mainstream performances venues for South Indian classical music in Chennai. Interestingly enough, their poetry delegitimized the caste system. For more on the spread of *harikeerta* in Tamil Nadu, see Soneji (2013).



Figure 3.2: Gopal with Sri Tukaram Ganapathi Maharaj, image courtesy of Priya Gopal

It was often difficult for Gopal to negotiate these conflicting musical worlds. She always prided herself on the ability to “shapeshift,” to move between disparate cultural identities and spaces that defined her diasporic experience. “But I was never really afforded an easy path in life to do this simply because of who I was,” Gopal told me. “I mean, everything about me is a split...Even in the Indian Arts, my identity was split. I had these very strong teachers, all demanding that I give them my full self. Even in vocal technique, it was split. There was the Karnatik musician, and then there was this *abhang*, *harikeertan* musician.” Despite these challenges, *abhang* singing provided a medium to articulate her voice in a more collaborative setting. Gopal vividly recalled her experience singing *abhangs* during long pilgrimage walks:

We would sing these songs while walking for miles upon miles to the temple. The whole point of these songs is that you would walk, and it

would move you when you're walking. It would keep you awake; it was normal for you to sing as loudly as possible. It was a far cry from the carefully cultivated, and somewhat nasal quality of Karnatik music. They're old songs. They're all easy. We're not seeking to impress through an expression of complicated thought. We're seeking to have communion.⁶⁴

Unlike the musical complexity and “carefully cultivated” timbres of Karnatik singing, *abhang* performance provided a powerful site to express the communitarian experience; voices and bodies sounding and moving together in rhythmic unison. I try to imagine their musicking bodies echoing through the rural Southern Indian landscape, the loud voices and spirited poetry cutting across cultural and caste-based divides in collective incantation. These aren't the sounds of more authentic or embodied voices. But they do sound an aesthetic politics outside the fierce nationalisms that the Karnatik voice has come to represent in postcolonial India.

Gopal sits at the nexus of divergent vocal traditions and aesthetic practices. Her multilingual vocality unsettles what Amanda Weidman (2006) has described as the “politics of voice,” or the ways in which certain voices and discourses about voices have come to embody the true representation of Karnatik music. Gopal's code-switching skills would facilitate her transition into the jazz world, a social space where multiplicity is embraced and even demanded by its global practitioners. But this new creative landscape would threaten Gopal's polyglossic vocality. She would become trapped by the markings of brownvoice, an orientalist mode of hearing updated for the global jazz listener's fetishization with alterity. In this next section, I map the issues of translation and mimesis

⁶⁴ Gopal, April 2017.

surrounding Gopal's journey into this new musical world, and the trauma that would come to shape her voice and sense of self.

Sonic Auto-Mimicry

Can the subaltern speak? For Homi Bhabha, the subaltern does indeed speak through its partial imitation of the colonizer's presence. This form of "mimicry" is a central strategy of colonial authority, based in a "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite." (1984: 126). A "sign of a double articulation," mimicry reveals the ambivalence of colonial authority, thus posing an "imminent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers" (ibid.: 129). But what happens when the subaltern (re)produces not the colonizer's partial presence but a representation of raced and gendered self? How does this form of auto-mimicry uphold or disrupt hegemonic authority and what role does sound and listening play in the symbolic violence forged in its aftermath? The next chapter of Gopal's life reveals troubling answers to these critical questions.

After seven years of rigorous work, Gopal became disenchanted with the gender, class, and caste barriers of the Karnatik world. She became increasingly skeptical of the Tamil Brahmins who embraced *harikeertan*'s caste-free utopianism while only returning home to uphold rigid caste divides. Her own doubleness as an American-born Indian made it that much more difficult to ignore. In 2006, Gopal returned to the US to continue her academic studies. She graduated high school while dual-enrolled at a community college, and later received an undergraduate degree in psychology from a university in

Miami.⁶⁵ But Gopal's musical calling returned in unexpected ways. In 2012, she became the first student in a new graduate program in a prominent music college. Gopal would spend the next two years studying and performing with various artists from around the world in an institutional environment both more inclusive, yet as doggedly insular, as the Tamilian musical world she left behind.

In some ways, the college she enrolled in is your typical jazz conservatory. During my brief tenure as an undergraduate jazz piano student in 2001, bebop was the lingua franca, its post-war radicalism reduced to cliché licks inscribed in institutional texts and practice room cubicles. But the school has begun to expand its aesthetic boundaries through classes in everything from turntabling to flamenco composition. Indian music frames the college's newfound global identity. In 2012, the same year as Gopal's entry into the graduate program, an Indian Ensemble was formed, and whose viral videos have exceeded thirty-five million views. A year later, the school began an India Exchange program, intended to stimulate cross-cultural exchange and provide exposure for Indian artists. Today, students can take courses in Indian art and culture, Indian music and contemporary composition, and South Indian rhythmic solfege in jazz. While expanding the jazz canon, this Indo-fusion trend relies on problematic east/west divides that treat the Other as fodder for a fetishized hybrid. Interestingly, the timing of these programs aligns with the success of Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, who attended the school twenty years earlier.

⁶⁵ Gopal received her degree while working part-time as Life-Skills Student Counselor at the Everglades Correctional Institution where she conducted poetry workshops with prison inmates.

From the start, faculty and students were entranced by Gopal's exotic voice. In a campus blogpost, the former program director described his fascination with the South Indian vocalist: "When I asked her to sing for me, I was completely mesmerized," he writes. "I felt I couldn't exclude someone like her." All of this despite her lack of a "traditional music education" and ability to read Western notation (Small 2003). The program director's description of Gopal's "mesmerizing" singing plays into tropes of the erotics of brownvoice. It reveals the ongoing desire for the Brown Other amongst Western artists, whose dabbling with alterity upholds their perceived musical inclusivity. And yet, the idea of not wanting to "exclude" Gopal suggests that the college admissions process is based in the strategic omission of certain musical voices deemed as "not jazz." The director's identity as a Mexican American reveals the impact of brownvoice on not only white listening practices but troubling ways of hearing amongst people of color.

Gopal's "mesmerizing" voice would be encoded across multiple performance and institutional spaces. In addition to performing in school ensembles, Gopal sang at official school events as a poster child of the school's newfound multiculturalism. She collaborated with several producers and her voice was used in various movie scores. In many cases, Gopal was forced to adopt the role of the token Other in commercial films and fusion gigs. These projects often utilized extensive multi-tracking in which the heavily produced voice is added onto pre-recorded instrumental layers. I discussed this process during an interview with Gopal and *mridangam* player Rajna Swaminathan in a crowded café in midtown Manhattan. While experiencing similar forms of tokenism, Swaminathan described her ability to avoid these trappings through her performance of a

masculine gendered instrument. Gopal's mobility, however, was more restricted. As she recalled, "they'll give me a drone and they'll say, 'hey, can you sing for like three minutes?' 'What do you want me to sing?' 'Just anything Indian would be great...' It's always like this: 'can you come here and please insert your Otherness?'"⁶⁶ Gopal's voice is digitally spliced onto a hazy "Indian" backdrop, where it becomes the stand in for an essentialized Brown Other that speaks the language of orientalist desire. Her self-awareness of this raced and gendered process makes its impact that much more violent.

Despite her attractiveness, Gopal's transition to the jazz world would be challenging. Coming from a more controlled musical environment, she had to adapt to new cultural and aesthetic codes. Western conceptions of harmony and form were unfamiliar. Gopal was particularly disconcerted by the pervasiveness of jazz machismo. As Deborah Wong (2016) argues, the gendering of jazz improvisation as a hypermasculine black art form based on virtuosity and coolness often renders the Asian American female improviser illegible. Similarly, Gopal was often inaudible within this male jazz space. During one jam session in Valencia, she was surprised that the professional musicians couldn't follow her through what she considered a rather "simple, South Indian folk song." As Gopal recalled, "Why can't you just keep it simple? What need do you have to constantly be so musically busy? It doesn't really make sense to me. And to a certain degree, it still doesn't. It keeps you from listening."⁶⁷ Gopal's critique of

⁶⁶ Priya Gopal and Rajna Swaminathan, interview with Dhiren Panikker, November 6, 2016.

⁶⁷ Gopal, April 2017.

musical complexity is surprising given Karnatik values of virtuosity and playful competition. But it also highlights the gendered nature of the jam session in which a fixation on the virtuosic male soloist precludes the possibility of listening central to aesthetic values in jazz. Within this hypermasculine space, Gopal was simply unheard.

Gopal also had difficulty adapting to new vocal pedagogies and practices. In Karnatik traditions, a student absorbs a raga's complex shape through the strict imitation of one's teacher. Oral-based pedagogies are similarly found in jazz, but often only to the extent that they ground an artist's creative voice. On one occasion, Gopal's voice teacher asked her to learn the jazz standard, "Nature Boy." "But how?," she replied bewilderedly. Gopal went home and copied Nat King Cole's classic version note for note, thinking that this was the most accurate way to render the "song." Her teacher was amused. Only when a colleague described the unwritten rules of interpreting a lead sheet's skeletal melody did she begin to adopt a "jazz" voice, a marker of authenticity defined by timbral tropes associated with blackness.

But Gopal's newfound "jazz voice" would be trapped by the markings of *acousmatic brownness*. As Nina Eidsheim argues, classical voice teachers often correlate a student's "natural" vocal timbre to their prescribed race or ethnicity, assumptions of morphological difference based in a colonial heritage of modern vocal pedagogy (2008: 22-23). Jazz educators rely on similar racialized tropes. But rather than upholding the unmarked white voice, teachers often mold students to timbral conceptions of the authentic black voice. The desire for a "pure" or natural voice is colored by the rough growls, scoops, and "darker" hue of African American aesthetics. Gopal's voice teachers

were particularly concerned with her use of *gamakam*, or microtonal ornamentation central to a raga's expressive quality. Fellow students also perceived these timbral markers of difference, encouraging her to eradicate them in order to access a more authentic "jazz voice." In one case, a voice student commented on Gopal's supposed affected voice during a rendition of the classic jazz standard, "Skylark." The tune has been recorded by some of the most legendary singers, both black and white; Anita O'Day to Aretha Franklin, Bette Midler to Ella Fitzgerald. But Gopal wasn't legible in this vocal genealogy. As Gopal recalled, "she told me, 'in jazz you just talk, you just express. You don't think, you just say. You do not present, you are. So just say it. Say Skylark, just say it!'" Thus, Gopal's affected "ethnic" timbre is seen as a constructed presentation of self rather than an unthinking jazz voice that simply speaks and "expresses" its essence. In short, Gopal's voice is quite literally rendered "not quite black" and "not quite white."

But Gopal would embrace her in-between status as Brown improviser through a multilingual process of musical translation. She began recording various works for private study including recontextualized jazz standards translated into Tamil. "Oru Paiyan," her version of "Nature Boy"—the song that marked her tepid entry into the jazz world—features a synthesis of improvised *gamakan* and speech-like text set in a pan-Latin rhythmic context. These intercultural works unsettle the rigid linguistic, timbral, and aesthetic boundaries that define vocal jazz pedagogy and practice. For Gopal, the translation process was also an exercise in understanding herself and the doubled world she occupies as a South Asian American singer. "I'm not trying to prove my intelligence

or my ability to communicate,” she told me. “It’s really just my own attempt to familiarize myself with my own kind of language.”

On May 19, 2015, Gopal released a studio recording of a translated version of Gershwin’s “Summertime,” entitled “Nithākam,” in memory of the late filmmaker Prashant Bhargava. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, this video would circulate in Spanish music circles, and eventually led to a prominent jazz label expressing interest in her unique sound. The label was known for its recordings of “race records,” the commercial music industry that marketed “ethnic” music to various immigrant communities between the 1920s and 1940s. In addition to selling German, Polish, and Yiddish music, race records specifically targeted a growing urban African American market. Recordings of blues singer Mamie Smith and other African American singers were also popular amongst a mainstream white public hungry for authentic blackness. The label continued its racialized marketing strategies throughout the 1950s and 1960s by capitalizing on a growing R&B trend, with a brief foray into “new-age blues” in the early 1990s. Recently, they have rebranded themselves as a jazz label, with a focus on “global expressions in jazz.”⁶⁸ While expanding narrow genre categories, the record company still relies on the same sonic tropes that mark the race records of yesteryear. But rather than husky black blues singer or Yiddish tunesmith, the exotic brownvoice would be the object of aural consumption. As Gopal described to me, “I think what happened is that a production company saw a young girl singing in a small jazz club in Valencia, Spain, and

⁶⁸ I have redacted the URL out of respect for Gopal.

thought: ‘this is *the right amount of familiar and the right amount of unfamiliar* to possibly create a phenomenon.’ Actually, I don’t think that. I know that. Because that’s exactly what was told to me” (italics by author).

Gopal would return to the US in order to pursue a masters’ degree in ethnomusicology from UCLA. In 2015, she flew back to Madrid to begin recording her debut album, *Aikyam*, a bilingual Sanskrit and Tamil word meaning harmony, identity, and sameness. The music speaks a similar multilingualism: jazz standards set in Tamil, *abhang* devotional poetry, Appalachian folk, and Tamil anticolonial song woven through her hybrid vocality. For Gopal the album was a way of coming to terms with her dual identity and adapting her vocal training to a new musical world. “It was my way of feeling okay,” she told me. “Like both versions of myself feeling okay.”⁶⁹

But personal and creative conflicts would disrupt Gopal’s artistic vision. She was often asked to show “just the right amount of skin” or wear something more “Indian.” In one case, she was even told not to talk, to “just be there and be pretty.” Some encounters were subtler. In a conventional rhythm section, the piano, bass, and drums are configured in a semi-circle to stimulate visual communication and musical interaction. For the listener, this egalitarian setup allows for an equal distribution of bodies and sounds in keeping with jazz’s democratic ethos. The vocal soloist unsettles this arrangement through a central position on stage and gendered role in the musical hierarchy and spatial mix. During live performances, Gopal was routinely told to stand in the middle of the

⁶⁹ Gopal, April 2017.

stage despite her desire for a more egalitarian setup. As she described to me, “I have this issue that the piano is always to the left, and I’m always to the dead center while I’m performing. And I’m like, ‘but I’m not the star here... But they’re like, ‘well you’re the vocalist, you have to be in the center.’”⁷⁰

This vocal spotlight extended into the packaging of the album itself. When Gopal asked the label to have the other band members’ names on the album cover, the production company heavily advised against it: “I had asked if it could maybe not just be my face, if it could be everyone else’s faces too. But they did not want that. They said, ‘it has to be just your face. It has to be just your name, because if you add the word trio afterward, then you’re just another trio.’” That someone like Vijay Iyer has easily adopted the “trio” moniker reveals the gendered nature of such jazz marketing strategies. The original album cover includes only Gopal’s first name in lowercase text and a side profile of her brightly lit face, her eyes staring off into the distance as she clutches a turquoise Indian scarf against a stark black background. The intimacy of this photo belies its racialized anonymity. The production company relies on cliché markers of Indianness to market Gopal as the un/familiar brownvoice. The bright scarf and matching eyeliner and lipstick build on tropes of the exotic Other. Meanwhile, Gopal’s far-off stare and clutched hand over her heart suggest an inward longing in keeping with conceptions of India as a site of mystery and mysticism. Gopal’s positioning centers the racialized body while displacing the collective voices of her musical associates in the listener’s eye/ear. More directly, Gopal doesn’t get what she wants. Like her experience on stage and in the

⁷⁰ Ibid.

recording studio, we hear Gopal fighting—and in this case, losing—battles to control where her body goes, how her voice is recorded, and how her voice feels in her own body.

As the label began to lose confidence in their ability to market and distribute the album given recent financial losses, the production company decided to produce new content in the form of high-quality music videos. With enough pre-recorded material from the instrumental and vocal tracks, Gopal returned to the studio, as the production company had already invested a fair amount in the original recordings. As I described earlier, promotional videos such as “Invocation” emphasized Gopal’s heavily reverbed voice, aestheticized close-ups, and other markers of Indianness that aided in the (re)production of brownvoice. The use of reverb was particularly strategic. As Peter Doyle (2005) argues, the popular music industry often uses echo and reverb to transport the listener to an imagined space while providing them access to an artist’s inner most self. The heavily reverbed voice of Elvis Presley, for instance, creates a “deterritorialized” acoustic space that belongs to listeners as much as the artists themselves. And in representations of Hawaiian *hapa haole* music, these spatial strategies mark an orientalist and post-war escapism to exotic locales (Ibid.) These production techniques mirror the constructing of Otherness through sound in global pop. World music companies often use reverb and other techniques in order to create an imagined distance between the Western listener and exotic Other. In his reading of vocalist Sheila Chandra’s Indo-Irish fusion song, “Dhyana and Donalogue,” Tim Taylor describes how the heightened reverb sets the “Islamic” sonic world “much further back from the

listener,” resulting in a “mystifying” quality (1997: 150). Similarly, “Invocation” utilizes reverb to locate Gopal’s voice in a distant and mystifying past while creating a “deterritorialized” acoustic space in which the listener can access and perhaps claim ownership over her innermost essence.

The imagined Other is not only distanced by these production techniques but consumed and erased through the act of listening. As Jennifer Lynn Stoeber argues, race is made audible not only in the sounds themselves but within the “listening ear,” or the “historical aggregate of normative American listening practices” that “gives a name to listening’s epistemological function as a modality of racial discernment” (2016: 14). For Roshanak Kheshti, the racialized ear, as constructed by the World Music Culture Industry (WMCI), serves as an “orifice of sonic incorporation, a contact zone that brings the other into the body of the listener.” (2015: 61).⁷¹ The process of “aural incorporation” ultimately results in a form of “significance,” or a complete “loss of listening self within the aural other” (Ibid.: 66). The production techniques used on “Invocation” create a similar distancing, consumption, and erasure of the aural Brown Other. The audible but unseen musicians create a schizophrenic disconnect between sounds and bodies that obscures the group’s collective aesthetic while centering Gopal’s eroticized vocal body in a “deterritorialized” acoustic space. The brownvoice is thus incorporated and ultimately erased within the “listening ear,” her aural presence/absence serving as the medium for the listener’s dramatic loss of self.

⁷¹ Kheshti describes the World Music Culture Industry (WMCI) as both the commercial marketing category emerging in the late 1970s and its “academic doppelganger,” the field of comparative musicology, thus implicating the discipline of ethnomusicology in the broader colonial project.

But the recording process would prove more damaging to Gopal's voice and spirit. In order to synchronize the new videos with the original instrumental tracks, the producers forced Gopal to memorize her pre-recorded vocals note for note using the exact phrasing and ornamentation. This proved extremely difficult, especially during the *alaap*, or free-meter introductory passages reliant on improvisation and subtle rhythmic micro-timings. This process of memorizing and re-singing her own flawed voice was miserable for Gopal, unhappy as she was with the initial recording takes. Gopal described the context of this self-mimicry in some detail:

So, they rented out the studio again, so it was like doubling the costs, and everyone was there. The engineer was there. The same mic had to be there. This very specific C13 or 14, or whatever mic—the golden green mic that the engineer had sent back thirteen times before he got back the right mic (laughing). And it was this repetition of phase one, except with nervousness. So, I had mentioned to the engineer, who is this very kind man, that everything is already plugged in. 'Some of the takes are bad. As I'm singing back the album, why don't you just record it?' And I said, 'there are just a few things that you're spending so much time on auto-tuning, but I've memorized the whole damn thing, so record it.' So that's what we did.⁷²

Engineers often require vocalists and instrumentalists to perform the same musical line over and over or punch in individual phrases to align with pre-recorded tracks. But for Gopal, this self-imitative process served as a form of symbolic violence. In an interview, she reluctantly opened up to me about its effects on her musical and personal well-being. Gopal was initially quite hesitant to share the specifics of the event.

⁷² Gopal, April 2017.

I could tell it was a sensitive subject for her, something she was still actively processing. I am still wary to include it here for fears of reading oppression into the trauma of her embodied voice. She later conceded that “someone needs to tell this story.”

Sometimes, I wonder if it was singlehandedly the most violent thing that has happened to my music and spirit. All the words, confusion, emotions, misunderstandings—all of those things, I understand. This, I think universally is just wrong to impose. Phrases were cut and put together in a way that I would have never sung live. For me to hear it in and of itself was very unnatural. It was jarring. And then I had to memorize this unnatural pattern, and then it became my pattern. I’m hav[ing] difficult[y] not singing like that now, and that’s not how I sing... It has affected my growth, my artistry. That, I think, is the worst part of it all. What ended up happening is that I heard the album enough for it to make sense to me. I internalized basically what I had previously deemed to be a faulty aesthetic. And now, I operate with that. And that’s what I have difficulty forgiving the experience for. Everything else, all that stuff, I understand. People have hopes, things happen. But this, I don’t think was necessary. I don’t know how to undo it, yet (Ibid.).

Imitation is a common pedagogical method in oral-based musical traditions.

Transcribing tunes and solos are central to the development of any aspiring jazz musician. In addition to learning basic notes and rhythms, one memorizes the timbral inflections and rhythmic micro-timings that define a soloist’s unique sound. These mimetic processes are similarly found within Karnatik traditions in which the student learns a *raga*’s nuances through the minute replication of one’s teacher. Through imitation, the individual voice thus becomes a generative product of a collective musical past. But Gopal’s replication of her canned voice violently negates these creative processes. Instead, Gopal is implicated in a form of *sonic auto-mimicry*, the aural (re)production of raced and gendered self. Mediated by a white, male vision of

brownness, Gopal is first distanced from her own singing voice through the production team's "unnatural" cut and paste techniques and the subsequent "faulty aesthetic" she was forced to (re)produce. This doubled voice—a representation constructed around the historical resonances of brownvoice—is then copied and incorporated into her musical being through self-imitative listening. This doubled voice is both disturbing and unfamiliar to her. As Gopal told me, "When I say that I've grown to dislike my voice... I think it's largely in part because my voice sounds unfamiliar to myself now... It doesn't sound like the me that was taught singing." Finally, this "unfamiliar" self-replica erases and rewrites the singer's personal identity by becoming her "pattern," the way she hears and understands herself as a conscious being and social agent in the world. Unlike Homi Bhabha's colonial subject, whose imitation of the white colonizer's partial presence renders him/her "not quite/not white," Gopal's self-copy of imagined brownvoice makes her Brown/not Brown enough.

Like the aural practices of the WMCI, *sonic auto-mimicry* thus follows a similar process of distance, incorporation, and erasure. This racialized process relies on the embodied listening presence of the Other as mediated through the white male imaginings of brownvoice. The effects of this shift are tangible and traumatic. Through hours of practice, rehearsal, and performance imitating the same musical phrases and inflections with monotonous precision, Gopal's voice becomes the site of symbolic gendered racial violence, her vocal chords inscribed with physiological grooves resembling what Hortense Spillers describes as "hieroglyphics of the flesh," or the "undecipherable markings on the captive body" (1987: 67). These racialized inscriptions produce a static

vocality that impedes Gopal's production of new sounds in an improvisatory context defined by real-time collaboration. This repetition/negation of self is then reproduced within the performative spaces she moves through on and off stage. Gopal's dislike for her own "unfamiliar" singing and speaking voice ultimately renders a traumatic loss of subjectivity, an irony given the jazz community's fetishization of individual identity and agency. This violent loss of self renders the post-9/11 Brown female subject virtually inaudible.



Despite this trauma, Gopal is actively working to rebuild her voice. She has begun training once more in Karnatik music. Gopal's return to academia for a newly formed PhD program at Harvard University will hopefully resuscitate both her musical and scholarly voices in a more collaborative setting. Gopal has also joined a critical Brown mass. She often performs with fellow South Asian American improvisers in New York's creative music scene. For her, these spaces challenge tropes of solitary brownness. "I refuse to believe the lie that is propagated to us that only Brown person can occupy an x amount of area," Gopal told me. "So when I go and listen to Aditya Prakash, Shilpa Ananth, or Sid Sriram, or any other Brown body that is out there, that is trying to create a form of expression that better represents this hybrid world that we were born into, I will not let the thought overcome me, that they are my competition. They are my community, and I deeply resent that we have been made to believe that only one of us can exist at a time." But Gopal doesn't buy into a mono-racial notion of community. She is a founding

member of the We Have Voice Collective, a group of fourteen female and non-binary musicians, mostly artists of color, who have taken a stand against structural racism and sexism in the jazz and improvised music world. The collective's viral code of conduct, which has been adopted by many academic programs, highlights a series of political commitments aimed at creating "safe(r) spaces" for all "identities and positionalities" within an intersectional-feminist framework (2018). Their work speaks to a more inclusive vision of the jazz world that embraces the politics of difference and hope.

After several long years of patient waiting, Gopal finally released her album, *Aikyam: Onnu* (2018), through the success of a Kickstarter campaign. The record, while still containing the residue of sonic auto-mimicry, seeks a more ethical and collaborative musical vision. In figure 3.5, we can see a rough draft of Gopal's revised album cover, an original hand-drawing of two hundred of her contributor's names translated in Tamil. Unlike the static image of the solitary singer, this collective spiral of voices encircles the textual and sonic space in ways that begin to rewrite the racialized wounds of brownvoice. In a personal email to all her contributors, myself included, Gopal asked for the correct pronunciation of our names; a small gesture to correct the many mistranslations.

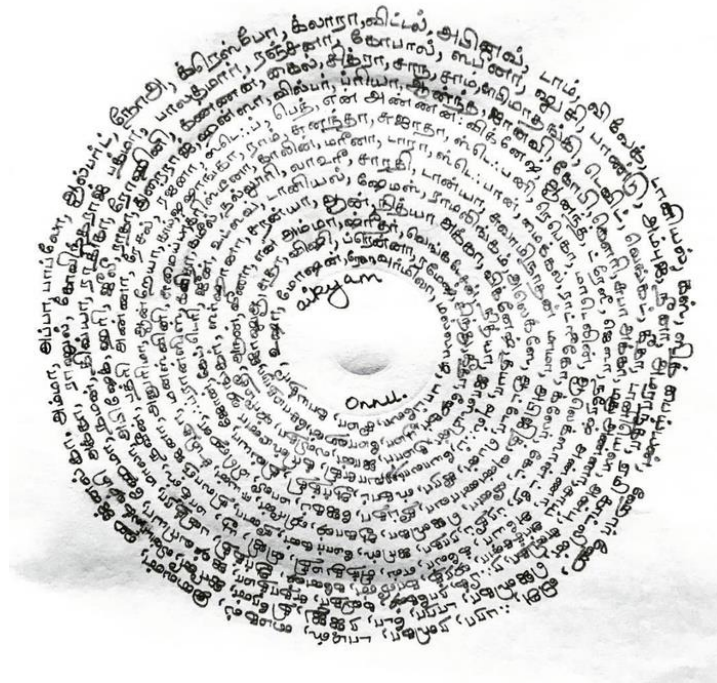


Figure 3.3: *Aikyam*: Onnu draft of album cover art, image courtesy of Priya Gopal

As we have seen, the South Asian voice serves as a highly contested site of gendered racial violence. The markings of *acousmatic brownness* can trap the exotic Brown female body in the vocal grain, which is then heard, consumed, and erased in the white “listening ear.” The violent act of *sonic auto-mimicry* reproduces this process within the Brown singer/subject, rendering her temporarily without voice and value. But as Gopal’s community-making suggests, these erasures can be restored through collective vocal agency. Following what Fred Moten describes as the “shriek turns speech turns song” (2003: 22), I now turn to another performative space, where these im/possibilities are made audible in the intimacy of communal song.

Seeking Communion

“One’s true voice is not something that you find, but that you construct, and that voice (authorial or sonorous) is constructed in part through our mimetic, dialectic, dialogic, and polyphonic relationships with the voices (authorial and sonorous) that surround us from birth. Voice is, in this sense, not the essence of self, but essentially relational: our voices are responses to a lifetime of calls.”

–Martin Daughtry (2012: 6)

“That is something that I miss from the world that I was in...the abhang world. We were just happy murmuring simple songs together, as long as it was together.”

–Priya Gopal (2018)

I walk from my aunt’s brownstone in upscale Park Slope and into Prospect Heights, a neighborhood in Northwest Brooklyn bordering Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights. Historically, the area has been home to a significant African American and West Indian population but urban renewal and lower rent prices have led to an influx of white residents threatening to displace this multi-ethnic community. I arrive at the Art Café + Bar, a small multi-purpose venue near Prospect Height’s newly gentrified district along Vanderbilt Avenue. The building’s industrial feel mirrors Brooklyn’s white hipster aesthetic. But inside the faux brick façade is a Brown social space brimming with diverse voices and potential encounters.

The Art Café + Bar is often rented out by Brooklyn Raga Massive (BRM), a local, non-profit music collective focused on South Asian American creative practice. Dedicated to “presenting and representing Indian Classical music in all of its diversity,” the organization promotes what they call “raga music,” a catchall for modal traditions

spanning from South Asia to the Middle East and North Africa (2018). The weekly “raga jam sessions” often feature long improvisations by predominantly white singers and instrumentalists trained in an array of “eastern” musics. I stuck around after the concert that evening, hoping to sit in during the open session. An older white guy in a ponytail set up a custom keyboard with microtonal sliders he used to mimic the more “Indian” embellishments. During one droney jam, I jokingly asked a white female audience member if all of the songs lasted thirty minutes. She replied scornfully, “It’s raga music!”

Exotic music aside, BRM features a diverse South Asian American presence. Co-founders Arun Ramamurthy, Sameer Gupta, and Neil Murgai are all South Asian American artists who explore Hindustani and Karnatik musics in both traditional and intercultural settings. Their presence reflects the male dominance of Indian classical spaces. But a focus on black, queer, and female performance counters these gendered erasures. BRM concerts include many young, female South Asian American performers and listeners, a demographic often excluded in both Indian classical and jazz scenes. The collective also disrupts narrow ethnocentrism by engaging with African American communities and histories. A John Coltrane tribute band regularly performs modally-inspired pieces by the legendary saxophonist, whose work built on a genealogy of Afro-South Asian confluence in the 1960s. Meanwhile, face-to-face collaborations with African American artists challenge the fetishization of blackness prevalent in desi culture and Afro Asian performance more broadly. Cultivating a creative space for diverse bodies and voices, BRM thus represents a critical site of South Asian American cultural production and post-9/11 Brown community building.

The evening performance on March 8, 2017 represented a radical Brown and feminist intervention. Coinciding with International Women's Day, the concert was part of BRM's monthly "Women's Voices" series, which features original music by female and queer artists of color. Before the music began, Anjali Banthia described her work with Women's World Banking, a global NGO that provides financial resources to low-income women of color. Music and movement animated this activist spirit. British born, South Asian American dancer and spoken word artist, Yalini Dream featured themes of identity and social justice that challenged essentialist representations of the Brown Other. Dream was accompanied by BRM co-owner and sitar player Neil Murgai, who played an Arabic frame drum with the words "No Ban" taped in large block letters, in reference to EO 13769, the federal ban on US entry for immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries. Dream's partner, African American/Cherokee emcee Jendog Lonewolf, joined the group on several songs. At one point, Lonewolf delivered subversive lyrics as Dream performed choreographed *bharathanatyam* movements in the crowd, blurring the performer/audience divide. On the final piece, the group was joined by spoken word artist and producer, Reg E. Gaines, whose work with Savion Glover on the Tony Award-Winning show "Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk," was one of the first black interventions in Broadway. In figure 3.6, we can see Dream with Murgai and cellist Varuni Tiruchelvam, their musicking bodies and voices sounding a post-9/11 Brown critique of Islamophobic violence and exclusion to an intimate sea of black and Brown.



Figure 3.4: Yalini Dream at BRM, image by Dhiren Panikker

Dream's performance set the stage for Priya's radical reinscription of brownvoice. The performance is framed by familial intimacy. Priya is joined by Rajna Swaminathan, one of the few female *mridangam* players in the world who has made her mark in both Karnatik circles and as a performer-composer in the creative music scene. Priya and Rajna have played together in so many musical contexts that their voices are now inseparable. The group features bassist Max Ridley, who roomed with the singer in Valencia, Spain during a year abroad studying music. The rhythm section also includes Bangalore-born pianist Sharik Hasan, an undergraduate jazz major at Manhattan School of Music who hadn't played with the group before. Violinists Trina and Arun Ramamurthy join the ensemble on several tunes. Despite these collaborative histories, the makeshift group never played together and only had time for a brief rehearsal during soundcheck. In figure 3.7, we can see Priya singing with closed eyes and open hands

from the center of the stage, just below a large tabla installation that frames the diasporic space. Trina, Max, and Rajna follow with bent heads and open ears in responsorial communion. Trina and Arun’s young son sits quietly on the edge of the stage beneath Priya’s feet; his head also lowered, listening to the echoes of his parents and perhaps his own musical future. The entangled sounds pour through Brown space, out the open doorway, and into the cacophonous urban soundscape. We watch and listen.



Figure 3.5: Aikyam at BRM, image by Dhiren Panikker

The band plays *Aikyam* nearly track for track. Priya sings “Skylark” (1941), Johnny Mercer and Hoagy Carmichael’s classic elegy for cornetist Bix Beiderbecke that her colleague told her sounded too “ethnic.” Priya reimagines Beiderbecke’s swinging lines through a Karnatik-inflected vocality that translates the romanticized lyrics of

searching love into an anthem of Brown flight. “Nithākam,” Priya’s version of “Summertime,” similarly rewrites Gershwin’s romanticized narrative of the deep south in the poetic language of the *Varakari*. Like the *abhang* songs she often sang, Priya hears this piece as a spiritual. “The first time I heard it,” she told me, “my heart was so moved and I loved it. I sang it so many times.” Vocalities meld in “Bramarā,” a confluence of the *abhang* “Runo Juno,” attributed to Sant Namdev (circa 1270-1350), and Miles Davis’ “Nardis” (1958), its phrygian modal framework bridging generation and geography. In media 3.1, we can hear Priya’s voice weaving through a thick bass and mridangam groove over a G minor vamp. Fluid *gamaka* lines intersect with Sharik’s pulsating piano drone as an older South Asian listener sways. I zoom in on Priya but pull back to capture the collective scene. Priya’s eyes are closed, suggesting an inward state. But she unsettles the aural gaze by turning to the side, facing the band in dialogic response. As Priya described to me later, her singing did fall into some of the same static patterns. But her voice feels freer here. Priya sings the last line of text, which signifies Namdev’s *mudra*, or signature phrase often only sung in traditional settings. She didn’t sing it on the album. “It was because Max was playing with her,” she later tells me. “He gives me the feeling of home.”



Media 3.1: “Bramarā,” video by author

Towards the end of the set, the group performs “Vāzhkai, En Rose,” Priya’s playful take on French crooner Edith Piaf’s sentimental war-time waltz, “La Vie En

Rose” (1945). The piece, which was never intended to be on the album, emerged from a duet with her pianist during an otherwise high-stress recording process. As Priya described it to me,

[The producer] had already left, and the pianist and I had just decided to dick around in the studio because we had an hour left. It’s probably my favorite song on the album. It was just so carefree. Translations usually take me days, even months. I actually translated this one in minutes. That’s how I had thought all of the music would have gone in the session. Just... happy, you know? I wanted it to be a private recording and send it to Albert, for his unborn son. I wanted it to be for his partner. It was just duo, the two of us. And it was just the softest, sweetest thing that had happened, a reprieve from it all.⁷³

This private moment reveals an alternative space of interrelation. In the absence of the producer’s gaze, these two musical friends are simply playing, “happily murmuring simple songs together,” as Priya once did in the distant *abhang* world. The song isn’t particularly political. But Priya’s liminal joy serves as a respite from the mechanics of racialized (re)production. Her hope for such musical happiness may have been lost during the rest of the recording session, but this intimacy filters into the BRM performance. At one point, Priya abandons the microphone and sits against the back wall of the stage, quietly watching Rajna solo over a spacious 3/4 groove as Max and Sharik lean in with smiles and eager ears. Unlike the inward recording process, the gaze is outward, an exuberant communitarian space of Brown belonging. An empty microphone sits in the center of the stage, echoing the traces of brownvoice whose singularity blurs in the intimacy of our collective hearing. The auto-mimetic violence recedes.

⁷³ Gopal, April 2017.



Media 3.2: “Vāzhkai, En Rose,” video by author

A collective Brown vocality unfolds during the final song, “Anju Kadal Thāndi,” Gopal’s version of the folk classic, “500 miles.” With roots in the oral-based fiddle tunes of the American South, the tune, also known as “Railroaders Lament,” became an anthem of the 1960s folk revival movement and a signifier of white, working-class struggle.⁷⁴ The repetitive lyrics narrate the story of a weary traveler far from home, too poor and ashamed to return. But through Priya’s voice, these sentiments of loss and displacement are recast in the language of the Brown migrant. As she describes in her liner notes, the Tamilian translation “tells the all-too-familiar tale of the immigrant: having traveled this far, how can we go back home empty-handed?”⁷⁵ The feeling of embodied movement mirrors Priya’s time in the *abhang* world, where communal song repaired the wounds of caste oppression. This exilic narrative also echoes the fugitivity of African American music making, the ability to evade capture that defines the black subject in the New

⁷⁴ The song was popularized by Peter, Paul, and Mary’s classic 1962 version and country artist Bobby Bare 1963 hit single, both of which topped the Billboard charts. Subsequent versions by the Kingston Trio and the Hooters placed it firmly within a legacy of white folk/rock social commentary. The Hooter’s classic 1989 version used the song’s metaphors of displacement as a political commentary on the massacre in Tiananmen Square. But “500 Miles” moved beyond imagined borders through its international success in Europe and Asia. Several versions emerged in South Asia throughout the 1980s and 1990s, including an Assamese remix entitled “Ketiya Bejarote,” by Bengali playback singer Jayanta Hazarika, the younger brother of Bhopen Hazarika whose version of Paul Robeson’s “Ol’ Man River” I described in chapter one. Like his brother’s Indianization of the black gospel anthem, “Ketiya Bejarote” re/sounds the folk narrative of white alienation in a modern Indian vernacular, albeit through the romanticized narrative of a young son missing his mother. These remediations point to the translocal nature of popular song and the layered vocalities embedded in their movement across the global media landscape in late capitalism.

⁷⁵ *Aikyam: Onnu*, 2018, album liner notes.

World. This musical intersection speaks to the mutual struggles of black and Brown indicative of the post-9/11 formation.

But Priya doesn't just narrate to a passive audience. Adopting the role of a musical preacher, she teaches us the song phrase by phrase: "Lord I'm one, Lord I'm two, Lord I'm three, Lord I'm four..." She gestures to us. We repeat. She finishes: "Lord I'm five hundred miles away from home." We follow in broken unison, our voices overlapping in collective Brown space. The band comes in with a slow gospel groove as Priya sings the verse several times in Tamil. "You sing by yourself," she tells us. Our voices turn outward as Priya now listens. The racialized process of sonic auto-mimicry is reversed. Rather than passively hearing her imagined brownvoice, Priya actively listens to other embodied Brown voices, whose sonic mass refuses singularity. We become engulfed in shared sound.

I start filming during the final refrain, hoping to capture its fleeting feeling for the ethnographic archive. But my phone dies. My detached objectivity dissipates as I fold into the collective sonic space, but not the dissolution of alterity some might accuse this ecstatic reading of celebrating. Rather, this new space is filled with the immediacy of emotion, bodies and voices lingering in sound. I get chills and a deep pit in my stomach. My voice quivers. I can't control my tears. I look around and others are crying too. Our bodies turn in toward each other. Priya goes back into the melody. She tells the band to drop out, gesturing to us with outstretched arms as we all sing the final chorus together. Our voices are woven into a sea of Brown. I wanted to include the short video here but

Priya asked me to leave it out to preserve the intimacy of that space. So that we were the only ones.

Conclusion: Toward a “Radical Listening Relations”

Building on a long history of orientalist desire, brownvoice emerges as the dominant way of seeing and hearing the racialized Other. From Peter Sellers to the Beatles, brownvoice uses sonic tropes of Indianness to construct the Brown subject as a site of mystery and mysticism. As I have shown, the global jazz recording industry capitalizes on these historical resonances through sono-visual techniques that map the eroticized Brown body and voice within the “listening ear.” This tri-partite process, distancing-incorporation-erasure, manifests through the process of *sonic-auto mimicry*. As we have seen through Gopal’s recording experience, this partial imitation of imagined self renders the South Asian voice the site of symbolic gendered racial violence, leading to a traumatic loss of subjectivity in a world still defined by the liberal “voice-essence-presence-agency” metaphor. But radical conceptions of the voice surface in the wake of Enlightenment individualism. As I have demonstrated, the affective power of communal song creates an intersubjective acoustic space that rewrites the racialized inscriptions of brownvoice. Drawing on the “radical inarticulacy” of black improvisation, this new Brown singing voice-in-relation counters dominant Western economies of voice, offering radical ways of seeing and hearing the postcolonial Brown subject in the New World.

But our BRM performance didn’t dismantle conceptions of brownvoice once and for all. As Martin Daughtry reminds us, “voices-in-performance don’t refashion the world,” but they do “microscopically chang[e] the performer’s surroundings and the

performer herself” (2012: 6). Our “voices-in-performance” altered the sonic and social space in small but critical ways. Our performance of “Anju Kadal Thāndi” connected the politics of *abhang* and the fugitivity of black song in a communal sounding of Brown belonging. My own affective response took me out of myself, allowing me to listen in ways that conventional ethnographic objectivity precludes. The process would change Gopal as well, by rewriting the auto-mimetic violence inscribed on her vocal musculature. Her singing did fall into some of the same vocal grooves but resonated anew through the support of her band members and our investment as co-creative listeners. The “hieroglyphics” on her flesh faded with each improvised utterance. As Gopal described, “There were only a few times that I was flinching at my voice. I was happy. It sounded like everything was in *shruti* as it were. Everything was resonating.” But as Nina Eidsheim reminds us, the racialized markings of the past on the vocal body are never fully erased. Rather, “when we write over the erased, we are writing on the resonance of what has been written and erased before” (2008: 210). Thus, improvisation is not a panacea for the historical trauma of brownvoice. But it does represent one critical, albeit liminal attempt to rewrite a marked vocality through the sociality of a different kind of listening; a listening with and amongst rather than a listening to, a co-present listening to the echoes of an imagined voice yet to come.



In her “contrapuntal epilogue” to *Modernity’s Ear*, Roshanak Kheshti describes African American writer Zora Neale Hurston’s ethnographic field recordings as constitutive of a different kind of anthropological listening. For Kheshti, Hurston’s self-

reflexive recordings are structured not around the world music industry's "heteronormative logics of power and consumption," but a "radical listening relations" that "produce imaginaries and ontologies that open outwardly away from the self/other dyad endemic to hegemonic notions of modernity" (2015: 126). A similar "radical listening relations" is audible in a recent recording by Gopal. In September 2018, she released an unmixed and unmastered recording of "Karunkuruvi" on Soundcloud. The six-minute medley includes two related yet somewhat opposing anthems of race in 1960s US: Nina Simone's "Blackbird" (1966) and the Beatles iconic "Blackbird" (1968). The piece features Gopal along with bassist Max Ridley and harpist Charles Overton, an interracial trio that often performs *Aikyam* in live concerts today.

The origins of the track are blurry. According to Gopal's post, the recording was made "before we went on tour," in "someone's living room," "late night on a sunday" in "either 2017 or 2016." The anonymity of the musical space is audible in the grainy recording. Taped by fellow Berklee alum Ryan Renteria, the track was self-made and not intended for release. "I never really made the link public, and forgot about it," Gopal writes. The song doesn't open with music but with Gopal's speaking voice: "We rolling?" Several voices reply in cacophonous overlap, "rolling." She continues anxiously, "Okay, uh. Okay cool, uh. 'Blackbird,' final take, dedicated to Karuna and Kaveri" (0:00). Atop a rolling harp pad and low bass drone, Gopal's voice—full yet not drenched in reverb—echoes Simone's probing question, "Why you want to fly, blackbird?" (0:18). Her voice moves in linguistic, timbral, and dynamic ranges that evade the racialized boundaries of brownvoice. A muffled harp string is left on tape (0:33).

Ridley enters with a simple syncopated vamp behind Overton's loose strums. (0:58). The recording slightly peaks as Gopal moves to the upper register, before returning to the unanswered question echoed across her vocal range (1:25). "Blackbird," she whispers in a *gamaka*-tinged caress that folds into speech-like grain (1:46).

Between songs, we hear the ambient sounds of bodies and voices moving. I hear a slight inhalation, perhaps from Gopal or maybe Overton as he begins the iconic opening chords to the Beatles "Blackbird" (1:52). Gopal sings the head atop rich harp and bass pads. There's a subtle vocal hiss on the final word of the first verse, "you are only waiting for this moment to *arise*." Her voice cuts off abruptly (2:17). They didn't erase and re-record the vocal glitch. Gopal moves into an original Tamil verse, the sounds of black freedom echo through Brown ears (2:23). She seamlessly moves into the English lyrics (2:44), before pulling back with intimate hums over Overton and Ridley's conversational comping (3:04). Gopal pushes into the upper register with a *gamaka*-inflected line over the words, "blackbird fly," causing the recording to peak slightly on the words "*parappai*," or "you will be free" (3:18). She sings the last verse in constantly shifting Tamil and English. She ends in Tamil. The recording fades with pulsating bass harmonics and breathless vocals.



Media 3.3: "Karunkuruvi," courtesy of Priya Gopal

This track is not mesmerizing in the ways many imagine the South Asian voice to be. It is intimate though, and beautiful. Like Hurston's self-reflexive field recordings, the track reveals new ontologies of listening that challenges the self/other dichotomies of

global jazz consumption. Unlike the imagined brownvoice—encoded in orientalist genealogies, cut, copied, and erased through phonographic mimesis—we hear another kind of Brown singing voice-in-relation. Gopal’s multi-vocality is audible in not only the seamless linguistic translations but her cracked pitch, vocal hiss, soft hum, and breath, all preserved on tape. And Gopal is not separated from her collaborators like she was so violently on stage, on paper, and on record. Rather, she sings with them, near them. Renteria’s voice even seems close, audible in its silent and radical listening presence. More importantly, Gopal seems conscious of the recording itself, wary of its violent potential. Her reflexive question, “we rolling?” signifies a critical self-awareness of the reproductive act that the recording process necessarily engenders.

And yet, Gopal’s voice evades its phonographic capture, leaving an inaudible aural trace that only she and her musical friends can hear in that alternative space and time where improvised music *really* happens. In those imperfect vocal cracks and hisses, Gopal is momentarily freed from the boundaries of her racialized containment. Her voice becomes fugitive. It is here, in the “break,” at the interstices of social life/death, past/present, presence/absence, where another kind of voice emerges, if we only listen beneath the grain.

Chapter 4

Crisis: Arab American Improvisation and the Politics of Un/belonging

In December 2018, I emailed trumpeter Amir ElSaffar with a list of important questions I forgot to ask him during our many in-person interviews over the past two years. I was interested in his upbringing and relation to black music as a multi-ethnic Iraqi American growing up in the white suburbs of Chicago. He responded within the hour. “It was like I kind of belonged and kind of didn’t belong,” he said in a grainy voice recording that he may have taped from his apartment in uptown Manhattan or perhaps an anonymous hotel room where he spends most of his time these days—Elsaffar maintains a busy touring schedule as bandleader and composer.⁷⁶ That statement struck me. It revealed some critical questions I’d been thinking about concerning the construction of the post-9/11 Brown subject. How do shifting experiences of race and racialization contribute to a feeling of un/belonging for many Arab Americans? How do black radical forms of improvisation create space to negotiate these liminal identities and form new spaces of interminority community? ElSaffar’s response also made me reflect on my own in-between experience as a multi-ethnic South Asian American who similarly turned to jazz during the geopolitical fractures of 9/11.

September 11th marks a dramatic turning point, a crisis in the lived experience of the Arab subject. The global War on Terror would begin a process of increased surveillance and containment across the Middle East and amongst the radicalized Others

⁷⁶ Amir ElSaffar, interview by Dhiren Panikker, December 18, 2018.

at home, what Satish Kumar calls the “enemy within” (2012: 158). As Sunaina Mara has written, this racialized violence is far from exceptional and “must be situated in the longer, global history of U.S. imperial policies in West and South Asia and in relation to other, domestic processes of criminalization, regulation, and elimination of racialized peoples by the U.S. state” (2016: 5). In terms of Iraq—the center of my analysis and the starting point of ElSaffar’s musical story—the creation of the Muslim terrorist can be traced to the Iran-Iraq war, if not to an earlier Cold War past. Two devastating ground wars, waves of international economic sanctions, and rising sectarian violence would erode Iraqi social, cultural, and material life. And yet, within the context of what Alan Badiou calls the “long war of terrorism” (2011: 20), we find emergent alliances, both real and imagined, that point to new collective futures outside the boundaries of race and nation that define colonial modernity.

A growing body of scholarship examines the shifting experiences of racialization amongst Arab and Muslim Americans, both pre- and post-9/11 (Jamal 2008; Cainkar 2006; Maghbouleh 2017; Tehranian 2008). This work shows how immigration laws and legal cases have shaped racial categories and identifications amongst Middle Eastern American communities, particularly in relation to whiteness. A parallel strain of literature explores the impact of post-9/11 racialization on the formation of new Brown subjectivities and political alliances (Maira 2016; Naber 2012). Music also serves as a critical site of post-9/11 Brown formation. Recent attention to Arab and Arab American hip hop highlights the role that black music plays in anti-racist and anti-imperialist coalition building (Maira 2008; Maira 2013). But few have examined the role that jazz

improvisation plays in the construction of Arab American identity and politics. I intervene in these discourses through an ethnographic analysis of the pitfalls and liberatory potentials of Arab American intercultural improvisation in a post-9/11 context.

I begin by tracing ElSaffar's multi-ethnic upbringing in Chicago. His early musical and listening history offer a window onto shifting racial dis/identifications amongst Arab Americans. Next, I examine ElSaffar's engagement with Iraqi *maqam*, the system of classical repertoire threatened by the American "long war." I focus on his work with Two Rivers, a sextet that explores the confluence of pan-Arab *maqam* and jazz improvisation. Drawing on Diana Taylor's distinction between the "archive" and the "repertoire" (2003), I argue that ElSaffar's work reimagines Iraqi cultural heritage through the gendered "repertoire" of improvisation to critique imperial and racial regimes. I close with an (auto)ethnographic reading of Two Rivers' performance at the 2016 Hyde Park Jazz Festival in Southside Chicago. Drawing on Alex Lubin's (2014) analysis of Afro Arab political imaginaries, I argue that ElSaffar's performance serves as a *sonic geography of liberation*, or a musical space of dissonance and difference that imagines new forms of interminority affiliation.

I turn to ElSaffar through both personal and critical curiosity. I am drawn to the rich tapestry of sound worlds ElSaffar inhabits, the depth of his engagement with Iraqi traditions, and his willingness to relinquish the desire for authenticity plaguing so many cross-cultural collaborations. I also feel a particular kinship with him as multi-ethnic improvisers raised by Anglo American mothers and "ethnic" fathers. I met ElSaffar in February 2016 after his CD-release concert at Symphony Space in uptown Manhattan.

We exchanged only a few words, but he seemed interested in my project and eager to talk about his work. He stood very close, and I remember his serious gaze and warmth. Over the next two years, we met several times for interviews in various spaces: a park bench near Columbia University where ElSaffar teaches private trumpet lessons; his apartment in Washington Heights; a coffee shop near his hotel in downtown Chicago; and Alwan for the Arts, an Arab American cultural center in Lower Manhattan where he serves as artistic director. I evoke some of these spaces as portals into ElSaffar's world and perhaps a mirror into my own life. I hope this kind of intervocal reading can reveal the intimate relationalities of both improvisational performance and auto/ethnographic writing.

While ElSaffar is central to my analysis, he is not its only musical voice. I intersperse brief narratives of two Palestinian American musicians: Zafer Tawil and George Ziadeh, both of whom perform in several of ElSaffar's ensembles. As Keith Feldman (2017) reminds us, any discourse on Arab America must address the question of Palestine, which remains a "shadow," an "absent presence" in both US racial politics and imperial histories. For Feldman, the issue of Palestine highlights the linkages between blackness and settler colonialism central to Afro Arab political alliances, both historical and contemporary. Tawil and Ziadeh's moving narratives of diasporic loss and Afro Arab encounter serve as vivid overtures to the chapter's more historical and theoretical terrain. Their personal lives speak to the global entanglements of race, empire, and nation central to Arab American musical life in the post-9/11 era.

“Just One of the Kids”

Amir ElSaffar’s musical story defies the conventional Arab American narrative. He was born in the West Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Illinois in 1973 to an Anglo American Lutheran mother and Shiite Iraqi father. His father, Zuhair-Bushra ElSaffar, was born in Baghdad in 1935, just a few years after Iraq’s partial independence from British rule. In 1953, at only seventeen years old, he left his home to study physics and chemistry in Wales as one of the first recipients of the Iraqi Oil of Ministry Scholarship—the program has since been suspended in ISIS-controlled Iraq. Zuhair would travel between the UK and Baghdad for the next fourteen years before receiving a teaching position in East Lansing, Michigan. Here, he met ElSaffar’s mother, Ruth Anthony ElSaffar (1941-1994), an Illinois native and professor of Spanish literature at the University of Illinois. In 1967, Zuhair officially resettled in the US amid rising political tensions across the Middle East.⁷⁷

Chicago has been an important site of Arab community for over a century. During the Great Migration (1880-1924), Christian Assyrians from modern-day Iran and Turkey began settling in Northwestern Chicago, particularly following the 1915 massacres in Ottoman Turkey. Later, Assyrians from Baghdad and other Iraqi cities arrived in the region after fleeing the violent revolutions of the 1960s. Just two years before Zuhair’s entry, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act would open the US borders to a more diverse group of Arab immigrants. Between 1972-2000, Illinois would become home to over forty thousand immigrants from Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq. This period also saw an

⁷⁷ ElSaffar, December 18, 2018.

increase in “brain-drain Iraqi Arabs,” those seeking education and professional employment or fleeing Saddam Hussein’s regime in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷⁸ Today, Cook County now comprises the third-largest Arab population in the US, including the highest concentration of Assyrians and Palestinians (Cainkar 2006).⁷⁹

Despite this pan-Arab presence, ElSaffar and his siblings didn’t grow up with a strong Iraqi identity. They were raised as secular Muslims and like many immigrant children, ethnic affiliations remained in familial and collective memory. ElSaffar remembers his father’s eyes lighting up while recounting stories of old Baghdad in the 1930s and 1940s, during the formation of the Kingdom of Iraq. ElSaffar remembers eating *kabob* and *bamia* (okra and beef stew) with local Iraqi families at weekly gatherings. But ElSaffar’s connection to Iraqi culture wasn’t this “identity thing,” as he described it to me. Rather, “it was just part of something we did. It wasn’t like, ‘oh now we’re entering that world.’ I wasn’t really conscious of it in that way. And I think that’s a good thing in a way, because it sort of seeped into who I am.” ElSaffar paused. “I don’t know if it’s a good thing, but it’s seeped into my general sense of consciousness. There wasn’t a division, a kind of compartmentalization” (ElSaffar, December 2018).

Part of ElSaffar’s ambiguous identification has to do his mother’s influence. “My mother was American,” he told me. “She was twelfth generation, so she didn’t impart me with this idea like, ‘you’re different because of this.’ And I’m kind of glad in a way, that

⁷⁸ These figures also include Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish refugees escaping Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War.

⁷⁹ For more on Iraqi migration in Chicago, see al-Tahir (1952) and Oschinsky (1947).

internally, I was just one of the kids.” But ElSaffar was made aware of his difference at a young age. While attending an all-German Lutheran school, ElSaffar remembers teachers and students looking at him differently. He vividly recalled one instance in the fifth grade: “I was never part of the popular group of kids and I didn’t really understand why, until one day some friend of mine pointed at a little kid who was a few years younger than us, and said, ‘oh, that guy looks like you.’ And I realized that, oh, he’s got darker skin—slightly darker skin—and darker eyes and hair. Okay, that must be how I’m viewed.”

ElSaffar’s sudden recognition of his difference reflects his in-between status as a multi-ethnic Iraqi American. Despite his mother’s colorblind acceptance at home, ElSaffar’s markings were made visible in the white public spaces he traversed in Northwestern Chicago. This was most evident in the almost all-white school where his Otherness was first made known. At the same time, ElSaffar’s reflection of weekly family gatherings reveals a parallel identity. His “ethnic” heritage was made audible in the proximity to Iraqi diasporic cultural spaces; the sights, smells, and sounds of Iraq, as well as the nostalgic stories of the old country carried in collective memory. This transition into a more defined Arab community was both fluid and unconscious. ElSaffar’s comment on the absence of an “identity thing” reflects his aversion to a politics of difference, at least at this stage in his life—his coming-into-identity would emerge later and through more musical means. Despite his lack of a “compartmentalized” identity, ElSaffar’s unique upbringing reveals a liminal space of un/belonging where the borders of inclusion and exclusion are constantly negotiated. His “off-white” appearance

makes these ambiguities that much more pronounced. In figure 4.1, we can see a family portrait taken at ElSaffar's home in Oak Park when he was thirteen, very close to the time he became aware of his own "darkness." The young ElSaffar stands with his family in a private moment that speaks to his in-betweenness as a child of diasporic displacement and interracial domesticity. Both he and his sister Dena (left) clutch the wooden chairs lining the dinner table in familial embrace.



Figure 4.1: Amir ElSaffar with his family in Oak Park, 1986, image courtesy of Amir ElSaffar

ElSaffar's ambivalence over his own identity reveals the shifting nature of race in Arab America, particularly in relation to whiteness. Like Asian Americans, Arab Americans have occupied a peculiar position in US racial hierarchies. They are often conceived of as "not quite white" (Samhan 1999) or "honorary whites" (Bonilla-Silva

2004) caught in between binary poles of whiteness and blackness.⁸⁰ Early Arab immigrants, most of whom were from the former Ottoman region of “Greater Syria,” often used their economic success, Christian identities, and “Caucasian” roots to pass as white in legal cases.⁸¹ In doing so, they distanced themselves from other racialized groups whose rights to citizenship were often called into question. As Sara Gualtieri argues, this first wave of Arab immigrants “participated in legal discourse and everyday social practices intended to mark them as different and more suited for national integration in America than nonwhites, specifically blacks and Asians” (2009: 11). The Arab American position thus reveals a complex process of racial triangulation; marked as Other yet able to use the privileges of whiteness to differentiate themselves from, and often subordinate both African American insiders and Asian American outsiders.

New immigration laws would shift these racial allegiances. Arab immigration to the US halted after the Immigration Act of 1917 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which restricted entry for groups from across Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. A diverse group of Arab immigrants emerged in the post-WWII era, including Palestinians displaced after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the Six-Day War of 1967, as well as Lebanese and Iraqis fleeing violent revolutions throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike the Arab first wave, these new arrivals eschewed categories of whiteness by adopting a pan-Arab American identity and allying with other minorities including black

⁸⁰ For more on Arab Americans and whiteness, see Abdulrahim (2008), Shyrock (2008), and Omi and Winant (2014).

⁸¹ Greater Syria includes the former Ottoman-ruled land covering modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine.

and Latinx (Ibid.). In doing so, they mirrored a new generation of Asian Americans committed to cross-racial coalition building during the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) movement. While ElSaffar never indicated that his father was politically active during this time, his settlement in the US during the volatile 1960s must have shaped his racial identifications and affiliations.

These racial dis/identifications would rupture in the wake of 9/11. Islamophobic fears have conflated racial, ethnic, and religious differences into the monolithic figure of what Junaid Rana describes as the racialized “Muslim,” a conflation of the terrorist and immigrant born out of neoliberal economic policy (2011: 9). Jaspir Puar describes this new figure as the “Muslim terrorist,” an “emergent, incipient Race, the Muslim Race” that extends “far beyond the neo-orientalizing or racialization of religious affiliation” (2007: 160). Within this context, Arab Americans have begun to distance themselves from whiteness through new racial identifications and interminority alliances. New studies show that Arab Muslims have begun to identify as “Other” on US census reports, particularly in urban cities like Chicago (Abdulrahim 2008; Cainkar 2008).⁸² As Sabrina Alimahomed argues, this new “affiliation with the category of nonwhite is of a highly political nature and is informed through their racist mistreatment by the white supremacist structures of the State as well as a shared affinity with the collective mistreatment of groups of color” (2011: 348). New racial categories such as “MENA” (Middle Eastern and North African) and “AMEMSA” (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim,

⁸² This illustrates a considerable shift in racial identification in relation to religion. A 2004 study shows that 65 percent of Arab Muslims identify as non-white (Cainkar 2008), while Arab Christians still identify more strongly as white (Shyrock 2008).

and South Asian) highlight this critical shift. But rigid state controls continue to erode anti-racist sympathies. In early 2018, the US Census Bureau denied a decade-long effort to include the MENA category on the 2020 census. In short, Arab American identity remains highly contested; its meanings continually shaped by shifting racial allegiances and geopolitical tensions.

Music can both strengthen and disrupt these racial dis/identifications. ElSaffar's earliest musical memories include singing choral tunes in his mother's choir at Grace Lutheran. At home, his mother taught him American folk songs on guitar and ukulele—an embrace of a Euro-American sonic history perhaps denied to a young ElSaffar in white public spaces. Around the same time, his sister Dena began learning classical violin and viola, and ElSaffar vividly remembers listening as she practiced late into the night. In the liner notes to his recent album, *Not Two* (2018), ElSaffar describes his sister as “the first influence on my musical development, introducing me to the Beatles when I was nine, and to Arabic music when I was in my teens. I used to fall asleep listening to her practice everything from Bach to Bartok on the viola, and the sweetness in her sound continues to inspire me.” This familial “sweetness” still resonates in ElSaffar's ears. As a member of his large ensemble, Rivers of Sound, Dena plays both the violin and the *djoza*, a traditional four-stringed spiked fiddle central to Iraqi *maqam*.⁸³

But ElSaffar didn't grow up listening to much Iraqi music. In high school, he played trumpet in band and orchestra. In the mid-1990s, ElSaffar began studying classical

⁸³ Also pronounced *jawza* or *jowza*.

trumpet as an undergraduate at DePaul University. He performed in various orchestras around town including the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, a training orchestra affiliated with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In addition to working with the group's principal trumpeter, ElSaffar had the opportunity to perform with celebrated conductors including Pierre Boulez and Daniel Barenboim. Like Iyer, these musical experiences position ElSaffar within a Eurocentric pantheon of white composers and performers. But black music would be a concurrent calling for the budding trumpeter. ElSaffar began playing jazz as a freshman at Oak Park High school, an experience that exposed him to alternative forms of music making outside rigid classical hierarchies. At DePaul, he also had the chance to work with jazz greats including the late trumpeter Clark Terry. In figure 4.2, we can see ElSaffar alongside Terry and the DePaul jazz ensemble. The all-male and almost all-white trumpet section stands in an interconnected semi-circle with a wide hypermasculine stance, their expressions revealing both interracial and intergenerational awe. I might be stretching here but I see ElSaffar as the odd one out, and it's not just his "slightly darker" complexion. His musicking body reveals an affective un/belonging; his shirt untucked, legs crossed and pointed inward while clutching his instrument and honorary white status in introverted yet joyful caress. He is quite literally in-between black and white.



Figure 4.2: Amir ElSaffar (center) with Clark Terry (right) and the DePaul trumpet section, image courtesy of Amir ElSaffar

ElSaffar's relationship to blackness emerged much earlier and through an unlikely source, his father. He recalls listening to James Brown and Chicago blues legends Muddy Waters and BB King from his father's old record collection. In particular, ElSaffar remembers wearing out old 78s of Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and other African American jazz greats. "Louis Armstrong was his reference, the music he loved and related to the most," ElSaffar told me. "He didn't listen to much Iraqi music. He loved 'black music,' as he called it. He was ahead of his time in recognizing this kind of designation that is becoming more commonplace."⁸⁴ I will get back to Zuhair's notion of

⁸⁴ Amir ElSaffar, interview by Dhiren Panikker, December 2018.

“black music,” but I am curious about his father’s singular obsession with Armstrong. Perhaps he heard the iconic trumpeter before leaving Iraq? Armstrong had already become etched in the eyes and ears of the Arab world through State Department Tours in the Middle East and North Africa, including a controversial 1961 trip to Cairo amidst growing Arab-Israeli tensions.⁸⁵ But Zuhair probably heard Armstrong more locally. Armstrong had become a mystical hero for native Chicagoans ever since his work with King Oliver’s Creole Jazz band in the early 1920s. These listening encounters might not represent deliberate forms of solidarity. As Deborah Wong reminds us, identification with African American sounds often “speak to less conscious alliances, affective and beyond,” in ways that reveal the relational construction of Asian American subjectivities (2004: 272). Through the act of listening to “black music,” Elsaffar and his father similarly forged less conscious, yet powerfully affective alliances that speak to the relational construction of Arab American identity.

But Elsaffar’s encounter with African American music also occurred through direct contact. When Elsaffar was in his early teens, his father often snuck him into the Checkerboard Lounge, a historic blues club in the heart of Southside Chicago home to musical icons from the Rolling Stones to Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, and Junior Wells. “I’m not sure how he and my mom discovered that place,” Elsaffar recalled. “It was a sort of an underground, legendary place. But it was also not a very tourist-friendly or outsider friendly location. It was couched in the middle of the really, really rough neighborhoods on the South Side, or at least we who grew up in the suburbs of Chicago—

⁸⁵ For more on Armstrong and Cold War diplomacy, see Von Eschen (2004) and Monson (2007).

–Oak Park, Forest—saw those neighborhoods as rough.” ElSaffar’s trek to the South Side clubs constituted an embodied, almost religious experience that would influence his two-decade engagement with black music. As he described,

That was an exciting moment for me as a thirteen-year-old, to hear blues in that context, and just the elevated feeling of just the beat and the singing and the way the audience was responding. Like I said, it was like being in church and it really felt that way. We left around 3am and I think they ended up going all night. And I ended up frequenting that place quite a bit once I got a car and was able to drive when I was seventeen or eighteen. That was sort of like a pilgrimage for me, to drive down to the Southside and then eventually sit in with the musicians.

It’s tempting to read ElSaffar’s pilgrimage to the Checkerboard as jazz slumming. But I don’t think that’s what’s happening here. Surely, the ElSaffars’ late-night sojourns were made possible by their privileged status as “honorary whites.” Saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa similarly described his mobility as a South Asian American jazz musician playing in some of these same clubs.⁸⁶ But the ElSaffars’ cross-town journey also tells a different story of interracial contact. Chicago continues to be a site of stark racial segregation. Rigid markers between a white north and black south, however, are more complex. Southwest Chicago has been home to the majority of Arab American communities. In addition to Jordanians and Lebanese, Palestinian Muslims have historically occupied the borders of South Side’s expanding Black Belt, often peddling goods in African American communities. Most Iraqis, meanwhile, settled in the city’s prosperous and mostly white Northwestern suburbs (Cainkar 2006). As a resident of the

⁸⁶ Rudresh Mahanthappa, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, September 21, 2016.

Oak Park and River Forest neighborhoods, ElSaffar's perspective on the South Side's "really rough neighborhoods" reveals his awareness of the racial and class differences that mark Iraqi and black subject positions. ElSaffar's cross-town journey thus reflects a concerted cross-racial move that unsettles Chicago's fractured geography. Music and listening are central to this racial-spatial intervention. ElSaffar's "pilgrimage" reflects what Tamara Roberts describes as "sono-racial collaboration," or "intentional engagements in which artists employ racialized sound in order to perform interracial rapport" (2016: 6). The Checkerboard provided the context for this liminal space of encounter. Bodies and sounds typically mapped separately are disrupted through the collective vocality, pulse, and "elevated feeling" inherent to black music. That ElSaffar would perform with some of these very musicians and commit himself to black improvisational musics throughout his career speaks to a conscious Afro Arab affiliation.

These kinds of transgressive encounters have been reanimated in a post-9/11 context.⁸⁷ As Alex Lubin (2014) argues, the rise of neoliberal globalization and the War on Terror have created the conditions of possibility for new Afro Arab political imaginaries. Transnational solidarities between African Americans and Palestinians have emerged from New Orleans to Ferguson, Ramallah, and the West Bank. In 2005,

⁸⁷ A modern Afro-Arab politics emerged during the 1950s. The anticolonial movement mobilized new anti-racist and anti-imperialist solidarities amongst people of color. The presence of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser at the 1955 Bandung Conference was particularly significant. An icon of pan-Arab unity following his nationalization of the Suez Canal, Nasser would make Cairo the center of Afro-Arab politics. Just two years after Bandung, Nasser organized the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference in the Egyptian capital, and in 1964, led the convening of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), where Malcolm X would deliver his iconic speech on the global linkages of anti-racism. Back in the US, Afro-Arab sympathies grew amongst a post-1967 black left mobilized by the Third World Solidarity Movement and the Six-Day War. For more on Afro Arab politics, see Kelley (2012), Lubin (2014).

Palestinian refugees donated to Hurricane Katrina relief efforts for African Americans, whom they considered victims of *nakba*, the “catastrophe” that marked the violent displacement of Palestinians after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The continued occupation of Palestine and ongoing police violence in the black community have stimulated new political alliances. In 2014, A group of Palestinian students joined black activists and victims of police violence in St. Louis and Ferguson associated with the Don’t Shoot Coalition, Tribe X, and the Freedom Fighters STL. That same year, the African Heritage Delegation made a pledge to support both Palestinians, African refugees in Israel, and Arab Mizrahi Jews living in Israel, after a deadly attack in the Gaza strip that killed over two thousand Palestinians. Around that time, a feminist and women of color activist group led by Angela Davis joined the Occupied Palestine movement in a concerted fight against Israeli settler colonialism.⁸⁸

But these solidarities ignore the structural discrepancies between black and Arab subject positions. In chapter two, I discussed the limits of Afro-South Asian political alliances given an Afro-pessimist conception of blackness as an ontological condition of “social death.” Similarly, Arab American claims to whiteness and inclusion into the nation-state often reinforce anti-black structures that serve as its precondition. Sara Imoud articulates these tensions within the discourse on Black-Palestinian solidarity.

⁸⁸ Segments of the African American community remain pro-Israel. In January 2019, The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) recently revoked a human rights award given to Davis after her support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement (BDS). These responses reveal the limits of Afro-Arab coalition building in the post-9/11 era.

Theorizations of anti-blackness produce a critique of identity politics and multiracial coalitions, as any politics of recognition ultimately claims inclusion in civil society and humanity, masking complicity with structures of anti-blackness. Similarly, settler colonialism is a permanent structure of native elimination, but the ontological position of the Native articulates with that of the slave only when s/he claims genocide. When the Native does not claim a radical politics of refusal, but rather, some form of liberal inclusion, s/he too capitulates to the structure of white supremacy (2015).

Imoud thus highlights the dangers of an Afro Arab identity politics based in liberal inclusion. Instead, Imoud calls for a decolonization project “not reducible to some form of native sovereignty wedded to the nation-state form,” but one that “seeks a far more radical break with Western epistemology, and the construction of a new world” (Ibid.). Alex Lubin (2014) locates this radical break in what he calls “geographies of liberation,” or “dialectical spaces produced in the collision between nationalism and colonialism, on one hand, and decolonial and liberation politics, on the other.” “This collision,” Lubin writes, “produces a transgressive geography within which Afro-Arab intellectuals have articulated political imaginaries beyond nationalism and colonialism. The geographies of liberation are thus spaces of dissonance produced when the exile compares the world as it is with a restructured world he or she would like to create” (ibid.: 7).

What might this new world look and sound like? How does Arab American improvisation activate a similar space of dissonance and difference? In this next section, I explore these potentials through two interrelated narratives of exile and encounter. Zafer Tawil and George Ziadeh are both Palestinian American oud players who perform regularly in ElSaffar’s band. But unlike ElSaffar, their stories begin on the fractured

borders of Israel and Palestine, a site of catastrophic rupture where issues of citizenship and belonging meet state-sanctioned violence and displacement. I briefly trace their journey out of this war-torn landscape and into a sonic space of Afro Arab intimacy.

Shadows of Palestine

Zafer Tawil

Zafer Tawil was born in West Jerusalem in 1976. He began his musical training on violin and Arab percussion, taking informal lessons at a local music school where he used to help out by cleaning and making coffee. Later, he studied classical violin and Western theory with a Jerusalem-based British violinist. Jazz would echo through his cosmopolitan surround. Tawil recalls sneaking into jazz festivals as a teenager. “Because I grew up in Jerusalem, I used to listen to jazz festivals in West Jerusalem,” he told me. “We go, if you have a friend, they smuggle you in. Not smuggle you in. You pay the ticket, but you go in with an Israeli friend to watch the concert. So, we had a friend, so we used to watch sometime. Chick Corea I think came.” Facilitated by his Israeli ally, Tawil’s early exposure to jazz speaks to the tenuous nature of Palestinian life on the borders of the settler colonial state.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Zafer Tawil, interview with Dhiren Panikker, May 16, 2016. For more on Palestinian and Israeli encounters, see Brinner (2009).



Figure 4.3: Zafer Tawil, image courtesy of Zafer Tawil

In 1999, amid ongoing violence from Israeli occupation, Tawil left his entire family behind to move to the US with his American-born Palestinian wife. Like many Palestinians from West Jerusalem, Tawil forfeited his legal residency almost immediately after leaving—Israeli immigration policy dictates that Palestinians must renounce their citizenship after leaving the country for six months. Tawil is quite aware of the racial basis of this exclusion: “It’s racist because it’s only for Palestinians who live in Jerusalem. If it was for everyone, you would feel a little bit okay about it. But because it’s for this kind of ethnic cleansing. For a while, I didn’t have any citizenship...For one year, I didn’t have the American, I didn’t have the Palestinian.”

Despite his liminal status, Tawil enjoys the privilege of American citizenship; the ease to move through borders and the status of “honorary white” that marks the assimilated Arab American subject. Tawil jokes about his ambiguous racial identity when

he travels: “They can’t figure me out. They think sometimes maybe I’m Russian, or maybe an American from Texas.” But this newfound freedom has its drawbacks, particularly when returning home to visit family. “I enter as an American, as a tourist with an American passport,” he tells me chuckling. His nervous laugh hides the pain of exilic loss; the permanent condition of the racialized Palestinian ever since the *nakba*, or “catastrophe” that marked a seemingly never-ending Israeli occupation.

Music would help Tawil bridge the diasporic experience. After resettling in New York, Tawil played in a variety of scenes from Indian Classical to new music and free jazz. He also began supplementing his income by teaching oud and kanoun to a handful of students, mostly Syrian Jews who come to his home with what he described as a “thirst for maqam.” In February 2016, I met with Tawil at his apartment in Bay Ridge, a historically Arab American community in Southwest Brooklyn. A variety of ouds, kanoons, violins, and frame drums rest on a large bookshelf and in half-opened cases strewn across the floor. We talk about his musical background and experience in Two Rivers. Tawil first met ElSaffar in the early 2000s as part of a network of New York-based Arab classical musicians. Ethnic differences were negotiated through the performance of Arabic *Samâi*, a classical repertoire played across the Middle East and North Africa. “We played that music for a while, and then Amir moved to Iraq. He left. And he came back speaking Arabic, talking about poetry...and then Two Rivers started.”

For Tawil, Two Rivers is a familiar space that allows him to articulate his unique musical voice in a pan-Arab framework. “Amir is smart,” he tells me. “He knows there’s an understanding of maqam between us. He could sing anything he wants, and we know

how to play with him without talking to each other. So that comfort, you don't need much materials if you understand the idea. You don't need to write it. You could react to the music in a nice, beautiful way." But Two Rivers also pushes Tawil outside his comfort zone. The creative blend of pan-Arab *maqam* and jazz improvisation forces him to listen and play in different ways. "It's new and also the lines, they are challenging rhythmically," he says. "Like the way there is seventeen, there's twenty, fives, and sometimes the lines have to enter at a specific place. It's hard, especially when the speed is different." In navigating these complex rhythmic structures, Tawil relies heavily on drummer Nasheet Waits. The two have formed a conversational approach across Arab and Afro-diasporic percussive traditions. "With Nasheet, you know we play phrases, it's like talking to each other. Sometimes it's on seven, sometimes on five, that we improvise. Sometimes it's 4/4, question and answer. But we don't plan it, it happens on the spot. It's not like we rehearsed it, 'you do five here and then we reduce,' or you know put a *tihai*."⁹⁰ We don't do that. It's more on the spot, the creation."

We head to the Yemeni Café, a local restaurant near Bay Ridge's busy fifth avenue strip. The sounds and smells of the Arab world are close. The streets are lined with restaurants, grocers, jewelers, travel agents, translation offices, and other Middle Eastern-owned businesses. Inside the restaurant, young men and families on early lunch breaks talk loudly in Arabic. The walls are lined with photographs of old Yemen, ancient historical and religious sites many of which have been destroyed in the recent US-backed Saudi war. Tawil points excitedly to a small TV in front of the restaurant that streams

⁹⁰ Complex North Indian classical rhythmic cadence.

panoramic images of Socotra, a small Yemeni Island in the Arabian sea home to rare fauna and wildlife now threatened by the Yemeni crises. But Tawil doesn't want to talk about politics or music. He is more concerned with eating. Long pauses fill the space as we eat lamb and *foul*, a Middle Eastern dish of spiced fava beans served in a large bowl that we both dip into with pieces of large Yemeni bread called *khobz*. I interrupt after a particularly long pause, "Do you feel there is a political statement behind the music?"

"Absolutely," he replies. "It's basically the Middle East mess that was created by the Americans and the Russians. Because they have something to do with it."

"The colonial history, you mean?" I ask.

"Yeah, and selling to ISIS and the bombs. Where do they get these explosives? The weapons, the bazookas. Where? The Russians. There's some other industry happening with Turkey too. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, man, it's crazy. Saudi Arabia makes all the money for the mess in Yemen and Syria."

Tawil is worked up at this point. I ask him about the political vision of Two Rivers. "Do you feel that it is significant having that many musicians of color on the stage?"

"Absolutely," he says resolutely. "Amir doesn't think about it intentionally, but it's lovely to have people from different backgrounds because they add different souls, different musical histories."

George Ziadeh

I first met George Ziadeh after a Two Rivers concert at the Hyde Park Jazz Festival in Chicago. He was subbing for Tawil—the two have been close friends and neighbors for the last eighteen years. Ziadeh worked as a sound engineer on their album *Crisis*, tuning the instruments so that all of the microtones resonated correctly. But this was the first time Ziadeh had played with the group and I was amazed by his ability to synchronize with the ensemble after only a brief sound check. After the show, the band clustered outside the entrance. I introduced myself to Ziadeh. He's more serious than Tawil, speaking with a low, gravelly voice and patient cadence. I asked him about the sound on stage and how all the voices seemed to blur together. He told me that the *oud*, the instrument that he plays, is a resonator and thus collects all of the sounds around it. This noisy sonic mass also reflects Ziadeh's experience as a Palestinian-born exile cloaked in the sedimented sounds of war and dislocation.

Ziadeh was born in 1970 in the university town of Birzeit, Palestine, just north of Ramallah in the central West Bank. His family was poor. "I grew up in a place where music is really a luxury," he told me during our interview at the Yemini Café. "You know, it's not accessible. Even having a recording machine or a tape recorder, it wasn't available. So, the radio was the main source of sound and repertoire to me. TV was very little. There was like one in the neighborhood." When Ziadeh was seven or eight years old, his sister saved up enough money to buy him a classical guitar, which he played

popular folk tunes on. Ziadeh also sang in a choir and learned to read music at an Italian-run Catholic school where his Greek Orthodox mother sent him as a kid.⁹¹



Figure 4.4: George Ziadeh, image courtesy of George Ziadeh

But these musical experiences felt alien. As an “ethnically pure Arab” with roots in the Christian tribes that settled in the region during the third century, Ziadeh is a proud Palestinian. You can tell in the way he speaks. Ziadeh was drawn to the native folk musics he heard around him. As he recalled, there wasn’t much electronic, popular, or “urban music” in the area he lived. Rather, “the native folk sounds of that region were very present at that time, felt strongly in every aspect of our lives.” Like many young

⁹¹ George Ziadeh, interview with Dhiren Panikker, November 9, 2016.

Palestinians growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, Ziadeh was also interested in political music. “It was, still is, a very active political thing, the issue of Palestine,” he told me. “So, the songs of the revolution, it became my genre for a while. I participated in a lot of events.” Interestingly, Ziadeh’s political involvement coincided with his work at the Hellen Keller School for the Blind in Israeli-controlled East Jerusalem, where he ran a music program for Muslim and Jewish children when he was fifteen—a moment of interfaith dialogue so rare in the discourse on Arab-Israeli relations. In 1989, Ziadeh left for the United States amidst escalating political tensions following the Palestinian *intifada*, the first of several Palestinian uprisings in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In the US, Ziadeh continued to work across musical and cultural borders. After settling in Bay Ridge, he moved to nearby Park Slope, the gentrified Brooklyn neighborhood I stayed in during fieldwork. In the early 1990s, Park Slope was primarily black and Latinx and the place where Ziadeh felt most at home. “I always felt like African Americans in terms of culture, we’re very similar,” he told me. “We are very similar societies, aside from the color. I just feel like it’s so much easier for me to fit in African American or Latino society than a white society. I feel like right away, it’s so rigid to me. It’s very different, you know. Africa is much closer... African things.”

Music would become a provisional site of interracial encounter. Ziadeh recalled listening to salsa legends such as Eddie Palmieri, Tito Puente, and Celia Cruz, all of whom were popular throughout Brooklyn in the late 1980s and 1990s. He was also drawn to reggae and played electric guitar with amateur Jamaican musicians from Park Slope in local jam sessions. He even composed original pieces that combines reggae grooves and

maqam—a curious moment of Afro Arab sonic translation. George’s connection to reggae makes sense given his politicized upbringing. But it was also just about the sound and sociality of playing music with others. “I love reggae, it’s the simplest thing ever,” he says. “It’s really no worries, musically wise. There’s not much musical effort, except just to be nice. Just to keep the time going and the pulse.”

Ziadeh also listened to a lot of jazz. He likes the standard “Autumn Leaves,” which he accidentally called “Ottoman Leaves,” an ironic mistranslation. But Monk’s “Round Midnight” is his favorite, and he sang the opening riff for me during lunch. “The melody is very modal, very *maqam* too me,” he told me. Like Elsaffar, Ziadeh understands the historical movements that frame these intercultural encounters. He cited the long history of Islamic influence in Africa and the impact of the slave trade on the spread of Arab musics to North America. Ziadeh described ElSaffar’s work as reimagining these latent linkages to create a dissonant whole. “I don’t want to simply tell you this is going back four hundred years ago. I’m just saying, when I see him doing that, I see him finding the spots or the things that connect these things together, make them sound, not consonant...” He pauses to search for the words. “Makes them kind of exist at the same time. They both breath at the same time and they work together, but they don’t necessarily cancel each other. Maybe they argue, but they don’t cancel each other.”

Ziadeh’s encounter with black music reflects the possibilities of Afro Arab affiliation. His reflection on the worry-free reggae stylings falls into reductive tropes of blackness. But his comfort in communities of color reveals a growing disidentification with whiteness indicative of post-1967 Arab American identity formations. Ziadeh’s

affinity with black culture reflects not only the physical proximity of Africa to the Middle East, but the symbolic links between black America and Palestine made possible by shared conditions of settler colonialism and antiblackness. Like Tawil, these exchanges occurred through the intimate space of improvised listening: the Palestinian “repertoires” echoing through his radio; the *maqam*-infused reggae riffs in Park Slope; the percussive sounds of Monk percolating in his exilic ears. Their dissonant coexistence speaks to the formation of new sonic geographies of liberation on the tenuous borders of un/belonging.

In this next section, I trace ElSaffar’s sonic discovery and recovery of *maqam* within the context of the “long war.” Through the metonym of crisis, I highlight the impact of the War on Terror on Iraqi material and cultural life, and the contested role of improvisation in diasporic critiques of empire.

Crisis: Salvaging Cultural Heritage in the “Long War”

Out of the ashes emerges a sound. Overtones, harmonizing, becoming many. Intangible threads of humanity, too delicate to be broken or destroyed, emanating from a shared, infinite past that is our present... The resulting music is by turns tumultuous and tender, both a lament for something lost and a quest for transcendental beauty.

-Amir ElSaffar (2015)

Crisis implies a critical turning point. It operates on micro and macro levels of human existence. It signals large-scale social, political, economic, and natural processes of collapse from the housing crisis to the financial crisis, the environmental crisis, and the recent border crisis. It also speaks to various psychic dimensions of the individual self, such as one’s feared midlife crisis. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, its

medical Latin origin also signifies a crucial stage in a physical illness resulting in either life or death from the “paroxysmal attack of pain, distress, or disordered function” to the “turning point for better or worse in an acute disease or fever.” But its roots in the Greek *krisis*, or decision, also implies an agency that belies the term’s violent imminence. The semantics of crisis thus serve as a metonym for the physical, affective, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the human experience and the im/possibilities of resolution through individual and collective action.

9/11 registers this polysemic notion of crisis. The initial terror attack signified collapse, a violent erosion of US power. The material destruction of the World Trade Center—the symbolic image of the country’s superpower status—elide its human toll. Almost three thousand innocent lives were taken. I still haven’t watched the footage of the attacks in their entirety out of a fear of experiencing the sheer physical violence. For many, the horrors would lead to moments of collective agency. We came together. We flew the flag high. We celebrated our unity despite our many differences. Music would be an important voice for this imagined community. As Pegley and Fast have argued, commemorative musical responses to 9/11 “attempted to forge a unified American community,” albeit one in which “appropriate gendered and racialized behaviors were modeled” (2012: 27).⁹²

But a crisis was brewing for the nation’s racialized Others. The geopolitical catastrophe of 9/11 reanimated fears of the Muslim terrorist, an “enemy within” lurking in the shadows of US political and social life. Already on the tenuous fringes of

⁹² For more on post-9/11 musical responses, see Ritter and Daughtry (2012).

un/belonging, s/he became the target of state violence, surveillance, and control, a site of “paroxysmal pain” and distress that marks a liminal state of racial expendability. But the event would activate a more global crisis. The response was swift. In March 2003, US forces mobilized by counterterrorist hysteria began its global War on Terror campaign. In Iraq, the nine-year occupation led to the death of an estimated half a million Iraqis, sparking ongoing sectarian violence and political instability that continues today. Of course, this crisis precedes the historical marker of 9/11. The US have meddled in Middle Eastern affairs for over three decades, from their involvement in the Iran-Iraq War to thirteen years of economic sanctions and two devastating ground wars, a perpetual “long war” that Ronak Kapadia describes as the “violent, corporeal process working on racialized populations and bodies” (2016: 369). In short, 9/11 signifies conflicting crises at the physical and symbolic level, a critical turning point into either hope or decay.

This violence has threatened Iraqi cultural heritage. In the days preceding the invasion, the National Museum of Iraq was ransacked by looters, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of artifacts. Ancient relics from Mesopotamia including Babylon and Sumer, from as early as the ninth century BCE, were destroyed. Other cultural sites were either demolished by aerial bombings, such as the iconic ninth-century Minaret Al-Malwiya (Great Mosque of Samarra), or used for strategic military purposes by US forces such as the construction of runways near the ancient site of Ur. More recently, the Islamic State has destroyed significant historical sites including much of the old Assyrian cities of Nimrud and Khorasbad near war-torn Mosul, where ISIS has filled the political chasm initiated by the US-led war (Polk and Schuster 2005).

The war has also endangered Iraq's rich musical history. The rise of Sadaam Hussein and political tensions following the Iran-Iraq War and Gulf War would have drastic effects on the survival of Iraqi folk music and *maqam*, an urban art music with roots in Ottoman-ruled Iraq.⁹³ Much of the tangible remnants of the music were destroyed in the 2003 bombing and subsequent looting of the Iraqi National Library, including the National Archive of Music and Sound and the Center for Traditional Music archive, home to over four thousand field recordings. International sanctions also created widespread financial impoverishment for musicians, many of whom either died or fled the country (Hassan 2001). Ongoing political turmoil following the invasion has drastically reduced the number of public concerts, forcing musicians into more private performance spaces. And more recently, the rise of ISIS and ISIL in Mosul and Basra have all but eradicated these musics considered heretical in radical Islam, particularly given the art form's Jewish roots. The imperial "long war" thus marks not only the corporeal violence inflicted on racialized bodies but the sonic and material culture that give their tenuous lives meaning.

⁹³ *Al Maqam Al Iraqi*, or Iraqi *maqam* is based in semi-improvisational compositions set in colloquial and classical Arabic poetry. Until the 1940s, the music was performed by Iraqi Jews in aristocratic homes, cafes (*gahawi*), and athletic houses, (*zurkhana*) throughout Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and Kirkuk. These cosmopolitan urban centers served as inter-Arab zones that stimulated intercultural mixing. The music shares musical similarities with rural Arab, Bedouin, Turkmen, and Kurdish traditions, as well as Persian *dastgah* and Turkish *maqam*. Iraqi *maqam* also refers to a specific repertory of approximately fifty fixed compositions. These intricate and semi-improvised vocal pieces are sung by a *qari*, or "reciter." Traditional Iraqi orchestras known as *tchalghi*, or *chalghi baghdadi* include the *santur* (Persian hammer-dulcimer), *joze* (four-string spiked fiddle), and various percussion instruments such as the *riqq* (tambourine), *naqqarat* (two small kettle drums) and *dumbeg*, a goblet-shaped drum found in various Middle Eastern and North African musics (Hassan 2001). For more on the history and practice of Iraqi *maqam*, see Simms (2003).

Diana Taylor has written about the transmission of cultural memory through what she calls the “archive” and the “repertoire.” For Taylor, the “archive” represents “supposedly enduring materials” such as texts, books, and films that while preserving cultural memory creates a separation between the “source of knowledge from the knower.” The “repertoire,” on the other hand, “enacts embodied memory” through “ephemeral” and “non-reproducible” cultural practices such as performances, rituals, dance, music, and singing (2003: 19-20). Unlike the static objects of the “archive,” the “repertoire” requires co-presence, actually people who “participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being part of a transmission” (Ibid.) In war-torn Iraq, as in other sites across the Middle East, global institutions have often protected vulnerable cultural forms through the archival medium. In 2005, Iraqi *maqam* was officially designated as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. This title recognizes the inherent historical value of Iraqi classical music. But this new designation also ossifies dynamic cultural forms by removing the “repertoire” of embodied sociality necessary to sustain their growth. As Taylor argues, UNESCO efforts represent a “cultural nostalgia” that “repeats the salvage ethnography of the first half of the twentieth century” by implying that these forms would disappear without official intervention and preservation” (ibid.: 230). For Yannis Hamilaki, the debate over the preservation of Iraqi heritage also signals an “ethical crisis” of responsibility, particularly amongst Western archeologists “who publicly mourn the loss of artifacts but find no words for the loss of people” (2003: 104). Thus, UNESCO classifications, while recognizing the value of Iraqi

cultural heritage, also serve as extensions of the colonial archive that claim racialized bodies, sounds, and repertoires as their own.

ElSaffar would perform his own musical salvaging of Iraqi cultural heritage. As I described earlier, ElSaffar wasn't exposed to Iraqi *maqam* growing up. During his junior year at DePaul, his sister played a recording of Egyptian trumpeter Samy el Bably, who had mastered a form of Arab microtonal trumpet playing. ElSaffar was intrigued. He found a trumpet on eBay with an extra slide and began experimenting. He later attended *oud* player Simon Shaheen's annual Arab music retreat at Mount Holyoke but was disappointed by the lack of Iraqi music. Inspired by the work of Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, ElSaffar began exploring his ancestral heritage more deliberately. After winning a \$10,000 trumpet competition and just six months after 9/11, ElSaffar set out to Iraq in search of *maqam*.⁹⁴

The reunion was cathartic. After greeting a host of relatives at the Baghdad airport, ElSaffar broke down and wept. Even the voice of a *maqam* singer would instill deep emotions. Between social gatherings, ElSaffar began learning Arabic and taking lessons with local musicians. At one point, he was working on *maqam rast*, one of the central modes in Iraqi *maqam*. But he couldn't quite grasp the microtonal embellishments essential to its core emotional and spiritual feeling. ElSaffar went home and listened to a recording of *maqam rast* by the iconic singer, Muhammad al-Qubbanchi. One particular phrase struck a deep chord. As he recalled,

⁹⁴ ElSaffar, December 2018.

In that phrase, he was just extending and extending and had this ululation, this kind of yodeling. And it just sounded like crying. And I started crying when I listened to it. So that moment, the combination of this moment of intrigue and curiosity, and when I was getting confused with what's what, then suddenly emotion and just direct connection to a deep suffering that caused the tears inside of me to well up. That was really it. And then ten years, or the rest of my life, was forever changed.

I'm tempted to read this moment as a sign of nostalgia that marks the collective folk voice for diasporic immigrants in search of their ethnic roots. ElSaffar was certainly moved by the emotions embedded in *maqam rast*'s ululation. These embellishments do quite literally resemble a physical wail in their gestural and timbral arc. But this emotional outpouring isn't entirely located in the "music itself." Like ElSaffar's experience at the Checkboard, it was through embodied and deeply situated listening—who he was in that particular time and space—that made this moment so transformative. By learning to listen, speak, and sing in this way, ElSaffar would perform a new identity that spoke to his in-between status as a multi-ethnic Iraqi American. And unlike the archival preservation of UNESCO, the embodied experience would begin a process of musical translation that reimagined the war-torn "repertoire" of Iraqi cultural life.

ElSaffar's search for *maqam* would continue outside of Iraq. Amid fears of another US attack, ElSaffar returned to New York City before embarking on a three-year journey across Europe in search of the last remaining musicians of Iraqi *maqam*. In Munich, ElSaffar located master *qanun* player Baher al-Rejab, one of the first musicians to notate Iraqi *maqam*, and whose father was one of the earliest Muslims to learn the art form from exiled Iraqi Jews in the early 1950s. In the small Dutch city of Utrecht, ElSaffar briefly studied with Farida Mohammad Ali, one of the few successful female

maqam singers who fled Iraq in the 1990s with her husband and *jowza* player Mohmmad H. Gomar. In London, ElSaffar found his *ustadh*, vocalist Hamid Al-Saadi, the only remaining musician to have purportedly mastered the entire Iraqi *maqam* repertory consisting of fifty-six surviving pieces.⁹⁵

ElSaffar's lessons with al-Saadi had a lasting impact. They would sit for hours singing, Al-Saadi meticulously correcting ElSaffar's intonation and embellishments. This oral-based process was essential to ElSaffar's embodiment of *maqam*. As he recalled, "singing in this particular way, it's like a meditation, those vibrations are super powerful. And reciting the poetry with the melody and the intonation, it really penetrates into one's bones and into one's cellular structure." For ElSaffar, singing with Al Saadi wasn't a static reproduction of the "archive." Rather, it served as a dynamic articulation of the "repertoire," both the gendered musical "repertoire" of *maqam* and the embodied "repertoire" of vocalization. ElSaffar's aural repetition thus provided a visceral connection to an Iraqi musical past embedded in a lineage of male reciters. Unlike the literal archives destroyed in the "long war" and protected under the watchful eyes of UNESCO, ElSaffar's voice would become an embodied "archive," a site of active transmission and translation that reimaged the tenuous "repertoire" of *maqam*.

⁹⁵ A former teacher at the Maqam Academy of Baghdad, Al-Saadi is in a prominent lineage of male vocalists including Yousif Omar and Muhammad Al-Qubbanci, one of the most prominent *qari'* who introduced Iraqi *maqam* to the world at the 1932 Congress of Arab Music in Cairo (Tsuge 1972: 60). ElSaffar has performed with Al-Saadi in both traditional and intercultural settings. Most recently, the two musicians performed at "Executive (Dis)Order," a New York-based performance series that highlights the work of Artist Freedom Initiative- (AFI) supported artists affected by the recent Muslim travel ban, Executive Order 13780. Al-Saadi has also begun to perform in Two Rivers and their next album will feature new compositions featuring the master singer.

But ElSaffar wasn't content simply reproducing "pure" *maqam*. After returning to New York, he began integrating *maqam* with jazz improvisation, another mode of repertoire-based transmission. The technical limitations of the trumpet were difficult to overcome—ElSaffar's classical and jazz training had conditioned his muscles and breath to work in specific ways. He began experimenting with alternate trumpet fingerings that could mirror the microtonal nuances of Iraqi *maqam*. The result was a unique hybrid style that captured the expressive spirit and tonal specificities of the art form. In 2002, ElSaffar formed Two Rivers, a sextet that combines pan-Arab *maqam* and jazz improvisation in a collaborative group context. The title of the band suggests an artificial melding of east and west. But the group avoids essentialist fusions by exploring the fluid boundaries between traditions. The ensemble combines a conventional jazz quartet of trumpet, saxophone, bass, and drums, with an Arab string section of *oud* and *buzuk*, with ElSaffar shifting between *santur* and vocals.⁹⁶

Two Rivers embodies the post-9/11 Brown formation. Members include Arab American, African American, Latin American, and European American artists, all of whom have worked across a range of genres and often outside their ascribed identities. The presence of Palestinian American musicians Zafer Tawil and Tareq Abboushi reveals a broader pan-Arab presence that unsettles narrow ethnic frameworks. Saxophonist

⁹⁶ ElSaffar wasn't the first to explore these musical intersections. Bassist and oud player Ahmed Abdul-Malik experimented with pan-Arab forms in black improvised contexts almost sixty years earlier. As Robin Kelley writes, Abdul-Malik was not interested in reproducing "authentic" Arab music, but rather sought to "create a musical environment where jazz improvisation could coexist with Middle Eastern forms" (2012: 105). Similarly, ElSaffar sought a more organic synthesis of jazz and Iraqi *maqam* that could do justice to both musical systems. Despite their similarities, ElSaffar was surprisingly unaware of Abdul-Malik's work.

Rudresh Mahanthappa's appearance in an earlier iteration of the band also highlights the affinities between South Asian and Arab musics, while revealing a broader spectrum of Brown indicative of emergent racial formations such as "MASA" (Muslim, Arab, South Asian).⁹⁷ Meanwhile, the central role of drummer Nasheet Waits builds on a history of embodied Afro Arab encounter. Tawil's reflection on playing with Waits illustrates the depth and intimacy of these interracial encounters.

This diversity, however, elides the band's masculine construction. Like most jazz groups, Two Rivers is entirely male. This gendered configuration isn't surprising given the historical erasure of women in jazz. The group also builds on a lineage of male-dominated Iraqi instrumental performance in which women occupy only occasional roles as token singers. Through the "repertoire" of improvisation, Two Rivers thus inherits and transmits not only the rich sonic terrain of jazz and Arab music, but the heteronormative masculinities that comprise both traditions. This interracial and interethnic assemblage ultimately embodies both the look and sound of the post-9/11 Brown formation in all its gendered exclusion. In figure 4.4, we can see these differences playing out through a photo from their performance at the Jazz at the Maverick Series in July 2016. Notice the band's wide spatial formation and egalitarian setup; ElSaffar eschewing his singular role as band leader while Waits plays a quiet mallet solo to an eager crowd. Lost histories of *maqam* resonate through a diverse male "repertoire."

⁹⁷ Mahanthappa was later replaced by Norwegian-born saxophonist Ole Mathisen.



Figure 4.5: Two Rivers at Jazz at the Maverick Series, image courtesy of Amir ElSaffar

Arab diasporic expressive culture has been a significant site of US imperial critique. In his reading of New York-based Iraqi performance artist Wafaa Bilal, Ronak Kapadia describes Bilal's performative inflection of pain on his own body as a way to "map the uneven contours of human vulnerability in times of war" and "uncover the intimate and affective politics of U.S. imperial violence...as well the alternative models of affiliation these politics engender" (2016: 362). But a focus on the visual occludes the role that sound plays in radical critiques of empire. Black music is a particularly powerful mode of resistance. Since 9/11, Arab, Middle Eastern, and other marked Brown youth have turned to hip hop to negotiate their racialized identities and critique US imperialism and state repression. As Sunaina Maira (2013) argues, Arab youth, particularly Palestinian Americans, have used underground hip hop to mobilize cross-racial alliances and political opposition to both US empire and Israeli settler colonialism.

ElSaffar is ambivalent about his role as oppositional Iraqi performer. "Everything ends up being political whether it is intended to or not," ElSaffar told me. "Certainly, if

I'm representing something Iraqi in the world. I resisted that for a long time, and I don't make an attempt to be overtly political—the music perhaps but certainly not the writing, not the discourse around it, not the liner notes, at least not in terms of making the music in service of a political cause." ElSaffar's apolitical stance and focus on the "music itself" often falls into the murky territories of universalism, something not uncommon for those working in intercultural mediums. As he described,

What I am interested in discovering is where is that basic understanding of sound? Because for sure, we are all dealing with the overtone series, we have no choice. There are infinite ways to relate to it, but ultimately sound behaves in a particular way on this planet at least... Finding something resonating on humanity with sound. What is humanity and sound? How do humans make music? Trying to find these common points and trying to expand my own musical view and language to be inclusive. I want to understand where I am in this larger conversation, and how we're relating to different elements around us.

ElSaffar's interest in discovering a shared humanity through sound reveals some of the universalist pitfalls of intercultural practice. But it's not the same as a white liberal multiculturalist extolling the virtues of music as a transcendent language. ElSaffar's position as a racialized artist places him in a different structural position in relation to such utopian discourses. Rather, his interest in excavating Iraqi cultural heritage through "repertoires" of improvisation is a concerted political attempt to remap the cultural and corporeal loss of Iraqi heritage.

In 2012, ElSaffar spent a year living in Lebanon and Egypt, where just a year earlier, protesters inspired by the Tunisian revolution took to the streets in opposition to the Mubarak regime. "There was a boiling over," ElSaffar recalled. "It was a heated time,

and also a confused time.” He described a moment during the two-year anniversary of the Tahir demonstrations when infiltrators from the new regime began sexually assaulting female protestors. In Lebanon, Elsaffar also played with exiled Syrian musicians with tragic stories from their homeland resulting from the Syrian Civil War and subsequent Russian and US-led bombings. For Elsaffar, these moments represented a critical turning point. “That was the crisis to me,” he said. “There was no way out.” On the “Day of Rage,” one of the bloodiest moments in the Egyptian Revolution, Elsaffar flew to Paris for a music residency at the Royal Maramount conservatory. During one rehearsal, he noticed two blind Syrian and Egyptian vocalists listening to Arabic news of the protests in double speed from their iPhones. The accelerated and distorted voices added urgency to Elsaffar’s creative response.

After returning to New York City, Elsaffar immediately began writing the music for *Crisis* (2015). The album is a layered narrative of political crisis and resistance. As Elsaffar describes in the liner notes, the work is a “reflection on a region in turmoil and strife: revolution, civil war, sectarian violence; a culture’s struggle for survival.” The album cover is based on a painting by Samia Halaby, a New York-based Palestinian artist who combines Russian constructivism with traditional Arabic and Islamic styles. In her book, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre* (2016), Halaby depicts the killing of Arab women and children by Israeli forces in a small village on the border of Jordan during the Suez crisis in 1956. In these moving drawings, Halaby avoids depicting Israeli police officers to highlight the power of Palestinian voice, while the settler colonial presence remains unseen but affectively felt. Halaby’s album cover for *Crisis*, however, is a more

abstracted representation of imperial violence. As we can see in figure 4.5, a kaleidoscope of angular shapes depicts the rubble of war. The viewer is drawn into its chaotic center, affectively thrown into the disarray and disorder of imminent crisis.

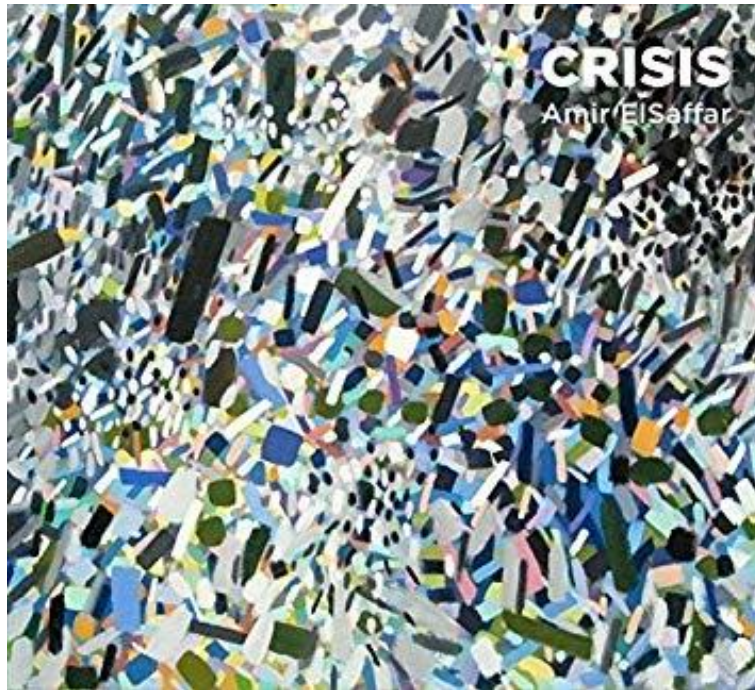


Figure 4.6: *Crisis* album cover, image courtesy of Amir ElSaffar

The music is similarly noisy yet mournful. The opening track, “From the Ashes,” features a chaotic drum solo and dense clusters of sound based in the modes of *Jammal*, *Saba*, and *Segah*. “The Great Dictator,” a militant commentary on the Sadaam Hussein regime, uses shifting mixed meters and cacophonous improvisations to create a similar feeling of disorder. ElSaffar’s quiet solo trumpet improvisation in *maqam Saba* provides some respite, a forlorn response that ElSaffar describes as a “lamentation on oppression and destitution.” The final three tracks feature a clear narrative structure of crisis:

destruction, decay, response. “Flyover Iraq” depicts the US-led invasion through bombastic ostinato figures in 15/8 and a Chicago-style horn section based in Turkish/Ottoman melodies. The track ends with a bass solo representing a crumbling foundation. This leads into the penultimate track, “Tipping Point, which serves as a response to the “Great Dictator.” Set in *maqam Hijaz*, the tune uses a sequence of eight bass lines in twenty-beat cycles with overlapping patterns of four and five. In the liner notes, ElSaffar describes the piece in more militant terms, directing the listener to the “hysterical frenzy” of a saxophone solo, “shards of glass” from the buzuk, and oud “air sirens.” On the final track, “Aneen” (weeping), ElSaffar depicts the “gasping sigh of survivors after the fall of Baghdad in 1258...without beginning, without end.”

ElSaffar’s creative response to political violence is no substitute for the sheer brutality of war. And yet, the album does provide a vivid sonic and discursive narrative of Iraqi deconstruction and decay. ElSaffar’s musical depiction of crumbling buildings during the US attacks highlights the history of imperial warfare and its effect on Iraqi material culture and social life. Meanwhile, his reference to the “Great Dictator” illustrates the oppressive experience of totalitarian rule. These vivid narratives exceed the “long war.” ElSaffar’s reference to the ancient “Siege of Baghdad,” in which Mongol forces ransacked the city, points to the deeper history of violence shaping Iraqi cultural memory. Like Bilal’s performative markings of the flesh, ElSaffar maps the human vulnerabilities of war to uncover the affective politics of US imperial violence and the alternative modes of affiliation they engender.

But the group's radical politics might have been lost during the album premier at the 2013 Newport Festival, which commissioned the suite. In a *Boston Globe* review, critic Jon Garelick (2013) points to Zafer Tawil as his favorite performer, who plays what he identifies as “not your average jazz instrument.” For Garelick, the sound of Two Rivers represented the festival's newfound diversity and inclusion of “world music” in a multicultural jazz canon cloaked in the veneer of American exceptionalism. “Two Rivers picks up on the modal scales and keening melodies of Iraqi maqam music and odd-meter grooves,” he writes. “Jazz is not a stranger to those Arabic modes, and by the time Carlo De Rosa took his bass solo — blunt and eloquent — it was easy enough to think, ‘of course, this is what jazz bassists have always done!’”

I wasn't there for the performance, but a video of the show is available on ElSaffar's website.⁹⁸ Like Garelick, the audience is similarly drawn to exotic tropes. The crowd bursts into a standing ovation after the opening piece, “The Great Dictator.” They might have been mesmerized by the sound of *Hijaz*. One of the seven primary modes of *maqam*, *Hijaz* features half-flatted seconds and sixths that resemble the Western harmonic minor scale, the cliché “oriental” sound used to signify Arabness in popular media since the 1950s. The audience also seemed enthralled by the band's high-energy playing. After Mathisen's honking solo, the group plays an angular head amidst fast second line hits in ten. Mathisen flubs the final hit, but the crowd erupts in a standing ovation. The camera pans to the crowd where we can see an older white audience on their

⁹⁸ <http://www.amirElSaffar.com/videos/>.

feet in exuberant applause. One woman looks visibly moved, perhaps crying. Her downcast eyes and longing expression suggest an anguish imagined in the displaced suffering of *maqam*. The camera pans back to ElSaffar, who slowly walks to the mic. “Thank you,” he says somewhat sheepishly. “That tune was actually called the ‘Great Dictator.’” The crowd laughs awkwardly.

The Newport encounter illustrates some telling things about the politics of Arab American music. We see a genuine love for ElSaffar and its gendered mix of masculine virtuosity and feminized Iraqi sorrow. But this enthusiasm also reveals histories of orientalist listening that continue to shape the way Arab bodies are seen and heard. Meanwhile, the crowd’s awkward laugh indicates their discomfort with, or perhaps blindness to, the music’s anti-imperial impetus. ElSaffar’s pithy gloss on “The Great Dictator” didn’t help register its political gravity. And Newport’s relaxing bayside surround and jazz picnic atmosphere certainly didn’t promote a “radical listening relations.” I’m left wondering about the limits of Arab American improvisation within the confines of the jazz festival space. Like Iyer’s performance at Ojai, the fetishization of alterity continues to constrain the political intentions of post-9/11 Brown performance.

In this final section, I turn to another listening space. I focus on Two Rivers performance of *Crisis* at the Hyde Park Jazz Festival, a small summer concert series held in South Side Chicago. The festival’s proximity to histories of black radicalism is promising, but the space is far from utopian. I trace some of these dissonances through an autoethnographic reading of the group’s performance and reception. In doing so, I return

to the site of ElSaffar's youth and the pilgrimages to the Checkboard that shaped his early negotiation of identity and un/belonging.

Toward a Sonic Geography of Liberation

In September 2016, I attended the Hyde Park Jazz Festival, a free community-based concert series held on the historic 59th Street Midway Plaisance in Southside Chicago. Designed by Frederick Law Olmstead in 1869, the Midway is a sprawling parkland originally intended as a marshy pond for leisurely ice skating.⁹⁹ This idyllic area was the site of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, a celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the New World. The event attracted tens of millions of visitors over its six-month run. Despite its pleasantries, the global fair was home to some disturbing late-nineteenth-century orientalist displays including "The Streets of Cairo," an exhibit featuring Syrians and Arabs in latticed windows that a popular catalog described as "bright-eyed, half-clad, Brown boys in dirty little robes and tattered sandals" (Gualtieri 2009: 7). As Sara Gualtieri argues, the Midway Plaisance thus serves as a "place of imperialist racialized fantasy run amok" (Ibid).

This racialized history has become a tangible marker of gentrification in Southside Chicago. The strip straddles the black working-class community of Woodlawn and Hyde Park, a racially diverse neighborhood that has undergone significant demographic shifts through several waves of urban renewal. Hyde Park was once a majority African American neighborhood. The area was home to radical black icons such

⁹⁹ From the French term "plaisance," or a secluded part of a garden.

as Elijah Mohammad, Louis Farrakhan, and Muhammad Ali. But rising rent prices and an influx of white residents from the University of Chicago—a private institution which sits on the north end of the Midway—has displaced many locals. Today, a Whole Foods, the iconic signifier of gentrification, lies just a half-mile away from Farrakhan’s house. And in the affluent brick homes of the nearby Kenwood neighborhood is the new residence of Barack Obama, a symbol of liberal interracialism that the Midway has come to represent.

The Hyde Park Jazz festival intervenes in this racialized space, taking over a four-block stretch of the Midway every September. The festival is an alternative to the Chicago Jazz Festival, which attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists to Millennium Park. The Hyde Park Festival has grown in the last decade, drawing in bigger names and more diverse audiences. But the organizers remain committed to community building. Their mission statement highlights an accessible, sustainable, and expansive vision of jazz grounded in the neighborhood’s rich cultural and political history:

We believe the South Side of Chicago is an extraordinary place. We celebrate the culture of the South Side by bringing people together for a free annual jazz festival. We celebrate the legacy of jazz on the South Side and work to create sustainable support systems for the present and future of the music and its communities. Jazz is many things to many people. We believe deeply in this diversity and work to build programming that allows for this diversity to thrive in both artistic pursuit and audience interest (2017).

I take the L from the newly gentrified suburb of Andersonville in Northwestern Chicago to Hyde Park. The shift from white to black is stark. At the Wrigley Field stop, I watch the remaining white tourists empty off the train in a drunken frenzy. The forty-

five-minute journey reminds me of ElSaffar's late-night pilgrimages to the Checkerboard, not far from the festival center. And like him, I can feel my own in-betweenness. I get off at the 60th street stop. A few black and Hispanic folks ask if I'm selling "squares," loose cigarettes in Chicagoan vernacular. I take the bus into Hyde Park and wander through the main outdoor festival along the Plaisance. Several African American volunteers are signing up new voters near the entrance. I take a photo of the booth against the festival background. An older woman scowls at me. I am reminded of the ethics of ethnographic research and the colonial histories that mark my field's emergence in the early twentieth century. I'm not including the photo here, but the woman is indeed scowling at me. It's still unsettling to look at.

I wander into the festival. Volunteers in bright green shirts, mostly African American, are passing out programs and asking for \$5 to \$10 donations. The audience is mixed, reflecting the historical role that the Midway has served as a multi-ethnic intermediary. I later realize that who shows up largely depends on who's playing—the evening show by the Jeff Parker Quintet on the East end of the park definitely attracted a larger black audience. During the day, the vibe is relaxed. A mix of black and white listen causally from lawn chairs. I talk with Ralph, an African American photographer hired to shoot the festival. He tells me about the neighborhood's deep jazz history including pianist Ahmad Jamal's iconic 1958 album, *But Not For Me*, recorded live at Woodlawn's Pershing Hotel just two blocks south of the Midway. Ralph describes the festival as an interracial meeting ground. We watch a half-dozen white groupies dance in quasi-1920s

jazz attire to a performance by Sammy Miller and the Congregation, a retro-swing group playing at the central Midway stage.

A significant black presence unsettles these white performatives. The South Side has been a critical site of black radical music and politics for over fifty years. In the 1960s, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) began cultivating new artistic and institutional frameworks for African American musicians. Today, the collective offers community-based concerts and free musical training programs for local black youth at the AACM School of Music. This year's festival also featured performances by local African American legends including pianist Willie Pickens, trumpeter Orbert Davis, and saxophonist Greg Ward. A black avant-garde presence sounded across the Midway through performances by Marquis Hill Blacket and Chicago-based improviser and sculptor Douglas Ewart, whose Rio Negro exhibit was featured at the Ojai Music Festival. Saxophonist Matana Roberts continued in this black radical legacy. The Chicago native and AACM descendent played a moving concert at the Logan Center's penthouse, an intimate performance space surrounded by open glass windows with panoramic views of the Midway. The room was packed with eager listeners. I happened to sit next to the aunt of pianist Ramsey Lewis' drummer. She reminded me of the neighborhood's social history and the recent redlining and real estate hikes targeting local black residents.

Roberts' performance invokes this black radical history through a "telling inarticulacy" that traverses the boundaries of speech and song (Mackey 1993). She recites the names of local musical mentors and black victims of police violence. "Sandra Bland,"

she says, interspersed with a short two-note response. Someone claps but abruptly stops. She continues listing lost voices from Trayvon Martin to Eric Garner and Philando Castile, who had been murdered by a Latino police officer a few months earlier. The room is finally still. “I’m not going go through all those names because they’re too many and it hurts too much.” Roberts plays a low F. “That’s your pitch,” gesturing to us. We sing. It isn’t a static call and response. Roberts plays loose blues figures over our collective voices in dissonant overlap. “I think it’s important to sing together,” she says. “I think it’s maybe one of the reasons this country feels like...” She pauses. “It’s not going to hell. There are good things happening. Good things are happening. But every time I look at the news, there is something new...God bless those four women and men that were shot in Washington. We just can’t get a break. Maybe if we all sing together? Can you imagine what Donald Trump would do if we all sing?” We all laugh.



Figure 4.7: Matana Roberts solo, image by Dhiren Panikker

“Monday’s going to be a hot mess,” Roberts says, referencing the upcoming presidential debate between Clinton and Trump. She plays pentatonic lines against our sustained drone. “The only reason I talk to you about these things is because this is the city that taught me how to care. This is the city that taught me to care about people and what happens to them. This is the city that taught me how to speak up.” Roberts continues with flurries of sound; somber blues lines and reverberant sheets of sound. I think about the entanglement of black voices echoed in her voice and horn. I don’t include the recording here out of respect for that sovereign space.

The festival culminates with two concerts in the Logan Center Performance Hall, the main concert hall for the festival. Interestingly, both performances were by non-black musicians of color, ElSaffar and saxophonist Miguel Zenón. Their placement in the larger concert space might seem like token programming. But Zenón’s presence does make sense given his significantly larger following. According to festival director Kate Dumbleton, the choice to put Two Rivers in Logan was more about providing the ideal acoustic space for his intimate music.¹⁰⁰ Despite this intimacy, the fixed proscenium seating created a separation between performer and listener that could have been avoided through a more fluid outdoor space. In either case, the choice to house Two Rivers in Logan was perhaps preferable to the nearby venue in the Oriental Institute, a museum and

¹⁰⁰ Kate Dumbleton, interview by Dhiren Panikker, October 12, 2016.

research laboratory home to hundreds of artifacts from across the Middle East including Iraq, a colonial archive that elides its imperial history.

Patterns of orientalist listening would creep into ElSaffar's performance. On my way to the show, I briefly chatted with a festival regular who mistakenly identified ElSaffar as Iranian. He was excited to hear the band, who he described as "multi-culti jazz." After the concert, I talked to Ron, an amateur white rock musician who hadn't heard ElSaffar before. He was taken by the complex "mixed meters" and "exotic" instruments. These encounters reveal the residue of orientalist listening surrounding the reception of Two Rivers. The conflation of Iraq and Iran is a familiar trope in post-9/11 discourse, which dissolves ethnic and cultural difference in the monolithic category of the Brown Other. Like Garelick's fetishization of jazzy Arab sounds, Ron's love of complex meters and exotic instruments wasn't surprising. Instrumental conventions in jazz are strong and anything outside the standard rhythm section and horns is still considered unfamiliar. The "multi-culti" moniker, however, was something I hadn't heard before. While it does signify a broadening of the black/white binary, it still pigeonholes Brown artists in a global jazz industry that fetishizes Otherness. In all of these cases, I am left with more questions than answers. How can we undo these racialized genealogies of hearing? What other modes of listening are possible? Does improvisation hold the key to a radical new social relations like many critical scholars have so passionately argued?

The Two Rivers concert created the conditional possibilities for new ways of hearing. The performance had several personnel changes that shifted the dynamics of group interaction. George Ziadeh and Palestinian American buzuk player Wanees Zarour

were subbing in for Tawil and Abboushi, who couldn't make the gig. It was the first time they had played in the group and a brief soundcheck served as their only rehearsal. Both Ziadeh and Zarour are accomplished musicians who have worked across a range of traditions, but their last-minute arrival disrupted the feel of the band. As Waits described to me in a personal interview, "It's not the kind of gig where you can step in out of the blew without a rehearsal and just hit, unless you're a clairvoyant, bad motherfucker."

I notice Ziadeh and Zarour struggling to catch the polyrhythmic hits and fast unison melodies on "Tipping Point," the penultimate song of the narrative suite I described earlier. After Mathisen's solo, the horns play a chaotic Gillespie-esq riff that morphs into out horn lines and choppy quarter notes before fading into an open drum and bass groove (0:00). Time dissolves. Zarour enters on *dumbek* as DeRosa and Waits play sporadic hits before abruptly stopping (0:35). At this point in the tune, Waits and Tawil typically play a high energy drum and *dumbek* duo; something they've worked out over the last decade playing together. But Zarour is hesitant. "I could tell he was a little nervous," ElSaffar recalled. "I said, 'you don't have to go into that. Just have the *dumbek* and play it, but you don't have to do this duo thing, because I can see it being intimidating to play with Nasheet like that.'" Zarour plays by himself, filling the empty space with intricate yet anxious riffs. He pauses and seems to be losing energy (1:08). Waits comes in with this delicate hi-hat groove and snare drum cross-rhythm that interlocks perfectly with Zarour (1:36) They don't totally match. Waits plays polyrhythmic triplet subdivisions that offset the pulse (1:45). But their sounds weave together. As the energy rises, I'm worried that Zarour will get covered by Waits. They

both pull back into almost inaudible, microscopic time (2:40). I close my eyes and almost can't tell who is who.



Media 4.1: “Tipping Point” duo, recording by Dhiren Panikker

In a personal interview, ElSaffar described to me how he heard this singular moment. “Nasheet could have approached it in so many different ways. But he understands Wanees and came to him and supported him, and said ‘yeah, it’s cool, let’s talk.’” On the taxi ride home after the gig, Waits talked to ElSaffar about the different energy in the group. As ElSaffar recalled, “Nasheet said one of the things that he likes is when there are subs. He used the word embrace; to embrace what they’re doing rather than trying to expect them to fill in another hole. And I said, ‘yes, embrace is exactly the right word.’” Waits describes this embrace as a process of musical surrender. “I think that is fucking kind of magical, when you can resist the temptation to be yourself, he told me. “You know, we all have certain things we gravitate towards, regardless how irregular it may sound to someone else? And to do something opposite to that. I think that’s the challenge because it’s far from what you are being told what to do by yourself. So you are going opposite to that. How does that feel?”

Conclusion: “Tipping Point”

We have reached an impasse, a crisis if you will. US imperialism, state violence, and surveillance threaten the survival of Brown communities both at home and abroad. Civil war and sectarian conflict continue to grow across North Africa and the Middle East. The

eighteen-year war in Afghanistan, the longest in US history, continues, despite President Trump's call for a dramatic removal of troops amidst partial stability in the region. In the ongoing Syrian Civil War, over half a million people have been killed while five million have fled to nearby Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. In Iraq, life is becoming more stable as some of the last remnants of ISIL have been dismantled in the northern cities of Fallujah, Mosul, and Tikrit. A recent photo essay in *The Guardian* entitled "Baghdad at Play" (Smith 2019) portrays images of smiling Iraqis at carnivals, night markets, and amusement parks. "On the streets, dandified young men in tailored jackets and drainpipe trousers sport towering pompadour hairstyles," they claim. Baghdad is on track to become one of the many global "megacities" with populations over ten million, mostly through a rise in populations fleeing ISIL violence in the city's peripheral villages. Global real estate companies, like the South Korean-owned Hanwha, are building large residential complexes atop the rubble of old Baghdad. But fifteen years of war and sectarian violence has left its imprint in the region. Urban transportation in Baghdad is in disarray and many still live in fear of ISIL bombings. The afterlives of the long war remain audible in their material and corporeal absence.

A crisis ensues. It demands a decision be made, some collective act that might recover the psycho-spiritual, affective, and physical registers of paroxysmal pain and death instituted by the ruptures of 9/11. The election of Barack Obama offered one hopeful glimpse at another future; a multi-ethnic African American president who might restore some semblance of liberal democracy. But as Nicholas De Guevera has written, the election of Obama only served as another marker of "racial crisis," an extension of

the global War on Terror based on an “enduring commitment to war-making (and global policing)” (2005: 185–185). Minority inclusion into the nation-state is another potential solvent. As I write this, the first Palestinian American congresswoman, Rashida Tlaib, was sworn into the Senate. Her presence, among other Muslim Representatives including Ilhan Omar, is a turning point, a powerful image of multicultural America that challenges white male hegemony. Tlaib’s recent threat to Trump, “We’re going to impeach the motherfucker,” is one such agentic move. Despite a racist backlash from conservatives, Omar’s critique of US support for Israel has raised important questions about the influence of pro-Israel lobbies including AIPAC. But as Sara Imoud and others have shown, the liberal inclusion of minority subjects into the nation-state also capitulates to white supremacy by upholding structures of anti-blackness that serve as its precondition. Is there a more radical possibility outside this national and colonial architecture?

Music is one ethical alternative. In a recovering war-torn Baghdad, the mixed-gender School of Music and Ballet, partially bombed and looted during the US-led invasion, has reopened as a result of a newfound interest in recovering Iraq’s rich artistic past (Omar 2018). Unlike the archival limits of conventional heritage work, this “repertoire” of song and movement reconstructs a cultural history crumbling in the aftermath of the long war. Amir ElSaffar has done his own form of sonic salvaging. As I have shown, ElSaffar reimagines the fragile voice of *maqam* through the embodied “repertoire” of improvisatory performance in all its racial and gendered signification. And despite ElSaffar’s universalist discourse and the orientalist overtones of his reception in mainstream jazz festivals, *Crisis* serves as a poignant critique of US imperial

and racial regimes that reveals alternative models of affiliation. Two Rivers performance at the Hyde Park Jazz Festival activates these new modes of being and belonging. Through a proximity to histories of black radicalism, the group models new sonic geographies of liberation that remap the contours of a post-9/11 world through the dissonant repertoire of improvisatory listening.

As Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz argue, “response doesn’t happen without listening, without the potential for surprise that listening brings, without trust that listening will result in new forms of affiliation, identification, and dialogue” (2013: 233). The response to crisis emerges in the many dialogic acts of listening I’ve charted: ElSaffar’s cross-town and cross-racial listening at the Checkerboard; Ziadeh’s Afro Arab collaborations in Jamaican Park Slope; Roberts’ radical speech against our collective hum; Waits’ gentle embrace of a tentative Zarour. It is in these liminal moments where a new politics of encounter is imagined, however conditional and shaped by power and difference. Improvisation might not have all the answers to the pressing political crises of our day, but it is a point of departure, a tenuous “tipping point” that marks our descent/dissent into a radically new world.

Chapter 5

“Sound Come-Unity”: Intercultural Improvisation as Decolonial Pedagogy and Praxis

I often heard Modirzadeh use the term “sound come-unity” to describe the work of Asian Improv aRts. The idea reflected AIR’s musical and political vision in an almost off-handed gesture. It seemed to embody the diverse sounds, collectives, and utopian potentials of all the musicians I have charted throughout this project. I wanted to know more. But when I asked Modirzadeh about it, he sidestepped. “Why don’t you ask Francis,” he told me—Modirzadeh often defers to Wong in articulating AIR discourse to the public. In March 2019, toward the very end of the writing process, I finally got around to asking Wong about the meaning of the mixed metaphor. He was nonchalant about its origin. “It’s just something I made up,” Wong said. “I think it was related to this one performance where we had a wide range of genres in the same piece.”¹⁰¹

But “sound come-unity” was more than a catchy intercultural moniker. Rather, it served as a metonym for AIR’s work in the world. Wong’s notion of sound is “Afrological” in orientation. He referenced the notion of being “in-sound,” a term used by the AACM to describe the act of positioning oneself inside the music, and a clever phrase that Wong often uses as an email sign off. To me, the concept also resonates with Ornette Coleman’s “sound grammar,” a universal property linking all musical systems that Alex Rodriguez (2015) describes as fundamental to an ethics of intercultural improvisation. These embodied sounds create community. AIR’s work is grounded in

¹⁰¹ Francis Wong, interview with Dhiren Panikker, April 18, 2019.

multiple communities: The evolving community of artist-scholars, the diverse Asian American communities that constitute Bay Area life, and the African American communities they engage with through direct encounter. These communities of and in sound are ultimately geared toward the project of unity. As Wong recalled, “our performances were like a call for unity because of all the different kinds of people that would be in the performances from daff players to kulintang to Dr. Loco to Wayne Wallace or Ramin Zoufounoun.” For Wong, these entangled sounds and bodies modeled an ethical vision of the future based in shared co-presence across difference. “The performativity of sound as it creates community,” as he described it so beautifully to me.

Recent scholarship examines the importance of decolonizing Western knowledge systems through pedagogies more attuned to global epistemologies of the dispossessed (De Lissovoy 2010; Giroux 2013). A parallel strain of literature explores the role of improvisational pedagogy in modeling ethical social practices and relations (Heble and Waterman 2008; Rodriguez 2015; Heble and Laver 2016). Little work, however, considers the role of improvisation in the broader project of institutional decolonization. In this chapter, I fill in this critical gap by examining the decolonial possibilities of intercultural pedagogy and praxis through an autoethnography of my experience in AIR’s “sound come-unity.” I ask several interrelated questions: How does the post-9/11 Brown subject navigate the constraints of the institution? How do improvisational pedagogies of listening unsettle classroom hierarchies and disciplinary silos? How does intercultural sound generate new forms of interminority community within and outside the academy? Following George Lewis’ call for an improvisational pedagogy as critical methodology

(2014), I argue that intercultural improvisation serves as a site of fugitive planning and collaborative study with the potential to decolonize institutional epistemologies.

I begin by examining Modirzadeh's vexed role as an artist-scholar of color. I outline the reception of his work in the field of ethnomusicology and in relation to discourses on Iranian American identity and racial politics. In particular, I examine Modirzadeh's theory of "chromodal discourse," an interdisciplinary system of cross-cultural exchange he developed in the late 1980s. I problematize musical universalism and situate the idea of chromodality within a genealogy of black techno-scientific interventions. Next, I turn to the decolonial application of chromodal concepts in the academy through an ethnographic analysis of Modirzadeh's intercultural workshop at the California Jazz Conservatory. I consider the ethics of improvisational listening and the role of intercultural practice in unsettling classroom hierarchies and Eurocentric knowledge systems. I close with an autoethnographic reading of my experience as performer in the ImprovisAsians! 2017 Festival, a series of intercultural performances and discussions held on the campus of San Francisco State University where the notion of "sound come-unity" was first imagined. SF State is the site of the 1968 Third World Liberation Front Strikes, and currently serves as Asian Improv's institutional home base. Thus, I return full circle to the roots of Asian American music and politics that began my study of Vijay Iyer in chapter two.

Several scholars have written about AIR within the context of Asian American identity and Afro-Asian politics (Asai 2005; Dessen 2006; Kajikawa 2012; Wong 2004). But their primary focus on East Asian Americans obscures the role of other musicians of

color. In chapter one, I described how a young Iyer was often inaudible within the Bay Area scene. Similarly, Hafez Modirzadeh has been a mere footnote in the critical discourse on AIR. Perhaps this omission is because of Modirzadeh's seemingly apolitical stance. The saxophonist's mystical theories of improvisation coupled with his lack of overt activism might appear unworthy of critical study. I suspect that his identity as a multi-ethnic Iranian American also informs this curious erasure. As Francis Wong described to me, Modirzadeh's exclusion reveals an "implicit bias" based in narrow conceptions of Asian American identity. Like Iyer, Modirzadeh just doesn't seem to fit. I argue that a critical examination of Asian American improvisation *must* address the role of the "post-9/11 Brown" subject, whose differentially racialized position reveals both the limits of an identity politics wedded to narrow ethnic frameworks and a more expansive multi-racial politics in keeping with the kind of community these artists imagine.

Modirzadeh is the creative core that binds the disparate threads I weave through my dissertation. Amir ElSaffar often spoke highly of the elder saxophonist, who inspired his own exploration of Iraqi *maqam* within jazz contexts.¹⁰² Modirzadeh was also an important mentor for Vijay Iyer during his brief tenure in the AIR community. A mutual respect and admiration remains today. After Iyer's duo concert with Rudresh Mahanthappa at SF Jazz in February 2017, Modirzadeh and I stood against the wall in the grand lobby as the budding South Asian jazz stars signed autographs for a small group of earnest fans. As the crowd died down, they invited us over and greeted Modirzadeh with

¹⁰² Modirzadeh and ElSaffar collaborated on several projects across Persian and Arab modalities, including *Radif Suite* (2010) and *Post-Chromodal Out* (2012).

a big hug. The brief encounter was both familial and reverential.

But while Iyer and Mahanthappa occupy the Ivy league gates of the jazz and culture industry, Modirzadeh lives a relatively humble musical life: Teaching world music survey courses and tutorials at SF State; gigging sporadically for door money at small clubs in California and New York. He still doesn't have an official website. Modirzadeh remains self-effacing about this work. "Sometimes I just want to get out of the way and exit stage left," he tells me. "I only have a certain piece of talent. I can't carry it all. I'm listening to see what's being covered. If it's being covered, then I'll step back." This sense of quiet listening and ceaseless inquiry defines Modirzadeh's vision as a scholar, teacher, and performer. I don't aim to re-present this rich creative life—he has already written this story on the page, in the classroom, and on the bandstand. Rather, I want to explore, through my relation to him and the Asian Improv community, what an improvisational pedagogy and praxis of the intercultural might look and sound like in a post-9/11 moment.

The following represents a "co-authored project," a decolonial methodology that Chavéz and Skelchy describe as highlighting "partnerships between participants and ethnomusicologists" and "emphasizing community-based participatory research" (2016: 1-2). I exchanged several drafts of this chapter with Modirzadeh throughout the writing process. He replied quickly, inserting his own comments and corrections. Many of these changes were cosmetic; spelling and grammatical errors or dates, names, and other biographical details that I got wrong. Descriptions of his identity and background were particularly sensitive. In one case, Modirzadeh was wary of my situating him within a

post-Revolutionary Iranian American context, and he provided further details on his multi-ethnic upbringing in order to avoid such misrepresentation. In other cases, Modirzadeh altered the quotes that I had carefully transcribed from his classes and interviews. In most cases, I left the edited text as is. Some might accuse me of placating to an interlocuter who simply wants to control the discourse about him/herself. But like Gopal's strategic edits of her own voice, this process generated a dialogic space of knowledge production in which text, like improvisation, is never fixed but constantly unfolding and open to negotiation. As Modirzadeh wrote in one of our final email exchanges, "Your words inspire mine, and so back and forth here in dialogue, we are growing something that's getting even clearer than I could express alone."¹⁰³

Iranian American Identity and the Politics of Chromodality

Iranian Americans have occupied a peculiar space in the US racial imagination. They have often embraced categories of whiteness and are considered white on official census reports. Even after the 2000 census, which allowed Middle Eastern groups to claim alternative ethnic and racial identities, the majority of Iranian Americans still checked the "white box" (Tehranian 2008: 85).¹⁰⁴ This embrace of whiteness is due in large part due to an espousal of what Reza Zia-Ebrahimi (2011) describes as the "Aryan Myth," a nationalist assertion of racial and cultural superiority based on the return to an ancient, pre-Islamic past emerging in the wake of the Iranian Revolution.

¹⁰³ Hafez Modirzadeh, email correspondence, April 28, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ For more on the influence of census categories on Middle Eastern identity formations, see Omi and Winant (2014).

But the lived experience of Iranian Americans reveals more complex processes of racialization. Neda Maghbouleh points to “racial loopholes,” or “everyday contradictions and conflicts” that arise when “a group’s legal racial categorization is in conflict with its on-the-ground experience of racialization or deracialization” (2017: 5). During the Iranian hostage crisis, Iranian Americans experienced heightened educational and workplace discrimination. For instance, a Mississippi appropriations bill raised tuition for students from foreign countries under US economic sanctions. A similar law in New Mexico barred all Iranian American students from public schools and was later struck down for violating the Equal Protection Clause (Tehrani 2008: 122). These loopholes have become more draconian in the post-9/11 era. According to a PAAIA poll in 2008, over half of Iranian Americans have reported issues of racial discrimination through increased security checks, employment discrimination, and racial profiling (“Surveys of Iranian Americans” 2018). Executive Order 13769, the “Muslim Ban,” has reanimated these exclusionary patterns by restricting entry to the US for immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries including Iran. The Trump regime’s hardline stance on the Islamic Republic has exacerbated these tensions. In April 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo labeled Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGS) an official foreign terrorist organization. Despite assimilation, the post-9/11 Iranian American subject thus occupies the fringes of US social and political life.

Modirzadeh’s story, however, departs from the conventional post-Revolutionary Iranian American narrative. He was born in Durham, North Carolina in 1962, years before the mass arrival of Iranian following the 1979 Revolution. Modirzadeh’s father

emigrated to the US in 1956, during the first wave of Iranian immigration (1950-1979).¹⁰⁵ He came with little money, and despite becoming a physician over a decade later, the family grew up relatively poor. They moved around a lot, and Modirzadeh began living on his own as soon as he could drive, at just sixteen years old. Coming of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, Modirzadeh wasn't exposed to a lot of Iranian Americans. "Most white people in Durham thought my dad was from Puerto Rico," he told me. The young Modirzadeh was doubly in-between; not black or white, yet also not Asian or Latino. While living in San Jose, he was often mistaken for Mexican or Chicano. Modirzadeh's multi-ethnic upbringing enhanced these racial ambiguities. His mother was of Irish and Russian-Polish descent, and after his parents' divorce, Modirzadeh lived with his mother full-time. He often playfully identifies as "off-white." "They don't have a box for me," he told me during our first interview. "So, I assume they want me to check white."¹⁰⁶

But unlike many Iranian Americans, Modirzadeh was drawn to black music and culture from a young age. He began playing saxophone in middle school, inspired by big band jazz and early rock and roll saxophone solos. By 1978, he was fully consumed by the jazz tradition. He recalls listening to bebop greats including Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, and Sonny Stitt, as well as powerhouse hard bop saxophonists such as Eddie Harris and James Moody. By the end of high school, Modirzadeh was exposed to more avant-garde improvisers including Eric Dolphy, Albert Ayler, and Ornette

¹⁰⁵ During this period, increased oil revenues and foreign investments led to an economic boom and rising middle class in Iran. As a result, younger students began pursuing higher education abroad, particularly in the sciences and technology fields ("Iranian Americans: Immigration and Assimilation" 2014).

¹⁰⁶ Hafez Modirzadeh, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, December 4, 2016.

Coleman. And while living in San Jose, Modirzadeh began playing gigs with local Bay Area artists including saxophonist Sonny Simmons and spent much of the 1980s working as a freelance musician on cruise ships to cover school and living expenses.

But Modirzadeh's identity forced him to reconsider what it means to be an Iranian American jazz musician. "I was directed into this culture when I was around eighteen," Modirzadeh told his world music class during a lecture on Persian classical music. "I looked in the mirror and said, 'you love jazz but you're not coming from where Sonny Rollins is coming from. So, if to play jazz is to connect with your own story, then for me, this must be about something more Middle Eastern.'" Modirzadeh's reference to Rollins avoids a reductive identification with blackness prevalent amongst non-black people of color. At the same time, Modirzadeh registered his racial difference by distinguishing himself from James Dean, the iconic symbol of white masculinity. Like ElSaffar, Modirzadeh instead turned to the classical traditions of his ethnicized father as a way to articulate his personal story as a multi-ethnic Iranian American improviser.

While finishing his undergraduate work at San Jose State University (SJSU), Modirzadeh studied Iranian Classical music with Mahmoud Zoufonoun (1920-2013), an accomplished violinist and composer who emigrated to the US just before the Iranian Revolution. After a semester working with George Russell at the New England Conservatory's Third Stream Program, Modirzadeh began studying ethnomusicology at UCLA under the supervision of Dr. Ali Jihad Racy. While Modirzadeh's master's thesis (1986) examines Zoufonoun's performance practice, his connection to the Persian master was more than just academic curiosity. Using his hand-written transcriptions, Zoufonoun

taught Modirzadeh the intricacies of the *radif*, a collection of some 300-500 melodic figures that form the core repertory of the Iranian Classical system. An oral-based process of translation continues as the chief mode of musical transmission. Rather than learn on a traditional instrument, however, Modirzadeh translated the *radif* to the saxophone, developing alternate fingerings to capture its microtonal subtleties. This adaptive process would influence a younger generation of multi-ethnic jazz artists in their search for a musical identity within black improvisatory art forms.

In 1988, Modirzadeh began the PhD program in ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University. He studied closely with gamelan specialist Sumarsam, whose liberal approach gave Modirzadeh space to explore his more experimental theories. But Modirzadeh wasn't interested in becoming a traditional ethnomusicologist. Rather, the degree was an excuse to develop a new system of intercultural practice and be closer to New York City for performance opportunities. Inspired by his work with Zoufonoun and Russell, Modirzadeh began crafting what he called "chromodal discourse," an interdisciplinary theory of intercultural music-making that allows for the coexistence of multiple traditions within one cohesive system. Extending Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept (LCC), Modirzadeh posits various "tetramodal" formations based on the harmonic series and derived cycle of 5ths, which allows musicians from various musical backgrounds to engage in viable cross-cultural exchange. The synthesis of jazz and non-Western tuning systems including Persian *dastgah* and Javanese gamelan were of particular focus. The concept takes as its premise that "musical structure, although expressed conditionally

within specific cultural contexts, is an inherent universal in all musical practice”

(Modirzadeh 1992).¹⁰⁷ As he writes,

I coined the term chromodal to refer to an interdisciplinary approach to music-making I developed during the 1980s and 1990s: “chro” signifying the spectrum or range of and ‘modality’ signifying ‘a phenomena [sic] of behavior.’ I conceived new terms in order to gauge cross-cultural musical collaboration, where the parameters defining two or more formal traditions could be clearly and consciously exchanged between musicians in order to engage in ‘chromodal discourse.’ A multifaceted process of ‘idiomatic transformation’ could then be applied toward the flourishing of traditional practices beyond traditional boundaries, expanding the range of individual musicianship as well (2009: 256).

But chromodality was more than speculative theory. Rather, the system was meant for practical application in the academy. From 1990-1998, while Modirzadeh was developing an Improvised Music Studies program as adjunct professor at SJSU, he created a series of cross-cultural musical workshops based on what he called “Trans-Intervallicism,” a conceptual practice of connecting various intervallic structures applicable to any style. Notated exercises include individual and paired improvisations following a systematic process: 1) navigating the circle of fifths; 2) breaking the cycle; 3) creating tension through rhythmic subdivisions; 4) rhythmic approaches based in Near East, Central Asian, and West African traditions, and; 5) melodic exercises following a three-part system of “Tone Phrasing,” “Line-Generation,” and “Chromodal Tuning.” These methodical and creative exercises were intended to create a personal cross-cultural language by developing one’s “melodic” and “rhythmic intuition” in keeping with the

¹⁰⁷ This work culminated in his PhD Dissertation (1992) and accompanying album, *In Chromodal Discourse* (1993), released on the Asian Improv aRts label.

spirit of the “post-modern improviser” (Modirzadeh 1995: 56). As I later show, these exercises would also serve as a practical decolonial methodology that unsettled classroom and disciplinary hierarchies.

Since the 1990s, Modirzadeh has largely moved on from chromodal discourse as a systematic theory. “This whole chromodal thing is behind me,” he told his students during an intercultural workshop at the Berkeley Jazz Conservatory. “A bridge was built, great, now it’s for somebody else to use in their own way.” In recent years, Modirzadeh has developed new models of interculturality. Inspired by Carl Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious, Modirzadeh describes what he calls “aural archetypes,” or “inherent forms that re-arise spontaneously between all musical traditions of the world in defiance of any historical, geographic, or cultural distinction” (Ibid: 256). These sonic archetypes are embodied in what he calls “Makam X,” a riff on both the Arabic term “maqam” and the undefinable mathematical principle of “X,” with a nod to the black nationalist leader Malcolm X. As Modirzadeh writes, Makam X serves as a “universal spectrum of overtone partials naturally binding together all sound systems.” This phenomena is ultimately a “mode beyond any single culture,” a “system that defies a system, living before and beyond existence” (2011: 6). As I understand it, Makam X is Modirzadeh’s metaphysical shorthand for the harmonic series, the naturally occurring acoustic pattern of overtones constraining all musical forms.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ In a 2011 article, Modirzadeh describes Makam X in more detail: “Perceived as aural archetypes, such elemental shapes become homologous to fundamental tone-sequences, forming spontaneously beyond culture, transcending time beyond place or tradition. Coiled within each tone, a constellation of “partial” tones reverberates, a sonic gyre of intervallic contractions paradoxically expanding in spiral-formation. Just as visual experience is bound to the colour spectrum of light, aural experience is bound to this harmonic spectrum, set here to divine proportion that opens metaphorical possibilities of cosmic as well as socio-

Aspects of chromodality resemble universalist discourses on interculturalism in theatre and performance studies. Building on the work of Victor Turner, Richard Schechner describes the existence of cultural “kinemes” in various theatre traditions that express “universally recognized facial displays” and “target emotions” observable in the autonomic nervous system (1990: 32). By “conveying the same feelings everywhere,” such movements, he argues, “constitute the very heart of human performing art and ritual,” and provide the “best examples for the intercultural study of human communication” (Ibid.: 42). Schechner considered borrowing a natural element of the human species based on the “return to traditional, even ancient values,” and advocated for “cultures of choice,” or the free incorporation of cultures of birth and the Other “so that ‘them’ and ‘us’ is elided” (1982: 3-4). Modirzadeh’s “aural archetype” theory suggests similar colonial thinking. Like Schechner’s “kineme,” the “aural archetype” suggests a biological and metaphysical essence based in universal properties that bind cultural disparities into a collective whole. This utopian rhetoric obscures structural difference and the asymmetrical power relations undergirding intercultural encounters.

But Modirzadeh’s apparent universalist turn departs from these utopian imaginings. In one of our email exchanges, Modirzadeh clarified his position on chromodality, differentiating it from Schechnerian thought and Western academic discourse more broadly. Such colonial theories, he pointed out, rely on false binaries of cultural relativism and universality. Chromodality, on the other hand, is grounded in Sufi

political proportion. Therefore, signifying on visual representation of the aural offers an alternative perception of the development of musical practice and the autonomous drive serving its impetus” (2011: 1).

and Tao philosophies that bridge relativist and universalist approaches rather than privileging one over the other. As Modirzadeh described, “chromodal thought has always worked best when seen as the axis on which relativist and universalist poles meet from opposite ends, neither one nor the other yet containing both.” Ultimately, chromodality aims to “increase empathy to the point of obliterating hierarchy altogether.” Thus, chromodality, while appearing to reinforce colonial hierarchies, adopts a “counter-colonial” approach that avoids “attempts to control, dominate, disembody, or exploit musical culture for personal reasons or purpose.”¹⁰⁹

Chromodal discourse is also grounded in black epistemologies. As an interdisciplinary theory of practice, chromodality fuses the domains of music, politics, science, technology, philosophy, and spirituality. In doing so, Modirzadeh extends a black intellectual project that unsettles the Western division of art and politics. Modirzadeh’s thinking was inspired by African American artist-intellectuals seeking new systems of musical organization. John Coltrane was a particularly strong influence. As Loren Kajikawa has written, the saxophonist was a touchstone for many AIR artists, who drew on the masculine ethos of black nationalism to articulate their own politicized identities in opposition to “feminized” popular music (2012: 9-10). Modirzadeh’s post-bop soprano playing certainly imbibes Coltrane’s fiery sound. But Modirzadeh was also drawn to the saxophonist’s broad musical and pan-spiritual philosophy, which he often cites in his own classes and academic publications. Composer-theorist George Russell

¹⁰⁹ Hafez Modirzadeh, email correspondence with Dhiren Panikker, May 30, 2019.

was also central to the development of chromodality. The unofficial progenitor of modal jazz, Russell developed the Lydian Chromatic Concept” (LCC), a scientific and philosophical system of tonal organization based in the Lydian mode that freed musicians from the constraints of conventional harmony. Challenging the dominance of Western tonal practice, this model was an important decolonizing resource for many African American jazz players, whose rejection of rigid chordal systems enabled deeper exploration of non-Western musics.¹¹⁰

Ingrid Monson has written about Russell and Coltrane’s work as part of a broader intellectual project amongst post-WWII African American musicians that challenged primitivist assumptions of the feeling black musician and forged “symbolic links between jazz and the successful anticolonial struggles of Indian and the African continent” (1998: 217). Similarly, Eric Porter describes Russell’s techno-scientific theories as an intervention into the raced and gendered discourses of the 1950s that exploited masculine scientific thought to create an alternative universalism. In doing so, Russell “challeng[ed] narrow definitions of the human supported by scientific knowledge and beliefs about black people as irrational beings lacking technologies while simultaneously suggesting that the development of new technologies and modes of knowledge might allow black people to redefine their status as humans and perhaps reconfigure civil society as well” (2008: 230). Chromodality represents a similar techno-scientific intervention into the raced and gendered discourses surrounding the post-9/11 Brown subject. As authorial

¹¹⁰ In 2007, Modirzadeh also studied with the late saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman, whose theory of “harmolodics” similarly freed musicians from Western harmonic constraints, providing a more egalitarian space of improvisational interaction that reaffirmed Modirzadeh’s own chromodal thinking.

theorist in a lineage of black male artist-intellectuals, Modirzadeh draws on the masculine language of science and technology in order to dispel popular representations of the feared Iranian American. That he developed the seeds of this inquiry just after the Iranian Hostage Crisis speaks to the power of such interventions in the pre-9/11 era. Through his connection to a lineage of black radical artists from Coltrane to Russell and Coleman, Modirzadeh thus imagines new systems of musical and social organization outside Eurocentric paradigms. In doing so, he recasts the Iranian American from passive subject to creative agent of social change.

These radical approaches have met some institutional resistance. During an interview in February 2017, Modirzadeh discussed the reception of his theories in the field of ethnomusicology. He was planning a trip to the University of British Columbia as a guest lecturer for ethnomusicologist Michael Tenzer. Modirzadeh spoke highly of Tenzer, whose recent work on cross-cultural practice attempts to move beyond Western/non-Western analytic binaries (Tenzer and Roeder 2011). But Modirzadeh noted Tenzer's unawareness of his critical work on the subject. "I cite him in an article I had published by the University of Guelph, but I was wondering why my fifteen years preceding the time his work gets published—of working on something so parallel and similar but in a personalized way—didn't get on his radar first?" This wouldn't be the first time Modirzadeh's work was overlooked. At Wesleyan, Mark Slobin encouraged Modirzadeh to dub his project "speculative theory," to justify the inquiry to the department's more conservative factions. Modirzadeh also encountered resistance from senior scholars during his first presentation of chromodal discourse at the annual meeting

of the Society for Ethnomusicology, in Chicago, 1991.¹¹¹ This pushback makes sense given the field's wariness of musical universalism, mistakenly projected onto an approach that is more "counter-colonial" in form and spirit. Perhaps Modirzadeh's theories revealed a lack of critical distance expected of social scientific inquiry. I suspect that Modirzadeh's grounding in black ways of knowing also renders his contributions illegible in a field still defined by Eurocentric epistemologies. The continued unawareness and suspicion of his work reflects a broader erasure of minoritarian voices, whose alternative perspectives are crucial to the development of both a "post-White theory" (Wong 2004) and truly decolonized ethnomusicology.

Modirzadeh's current role in the institution also remains tenuous. After one of his world music classes, Modirzadeh drove me back to my Airbnb. Without the tape running, Modirzadeh spoke more freely about his struggles in the academy. After finishing his PhD in the early 1990s, Modirzadeh worked as an adjunct lecturer at SFJSU, where along with his early mentor, the late Dwight Cannon, he developed an interdisciplinary program in Improvised Music Studies. Despite these contributions, however, the department refused to hire a full-time faculty member for the new program, until Modirzadeh submitted a formal grievance, citing institutional racism. Modirzadeh eventually left in 1998 to take on a full-time position at SF State, while SJSU replaced the Improvised Music program with a conventional jazz studies format. Similar patterns have emerged during Modirzadeh's tenure at SF State, where he has taught since 1998. He described being gradually pushed out of the jazz emphasis and instead, pigeonholed as the token

¹¹¹ Hafez Modirzadeh, interview with Dhiren Panikker, February 7, 2017.

world music expert. When he proposed expanding the emphasis name from “World” to “Creative/World” music, he was met with faculty resistance, one even accusing him of being “anti-western.” A current student later told me that he once saw Modirzadeh tear off the moniker of “Professor of World Music” from his office door.¹¹²

In February 2017, I met with Modirzadeh in his office at SF State. The space feels like that of the typical ethnomusicologist: Tall bookshelves lined with classic ethnographies and world music textbooks; open cases strewn on the floor with an array of non-Western instruments. But signifiers of discontent with the field are audible. A tattered quote by Trilok Gurtu is tacked to the wall above my head: “I don’t appreciate the term ‘world music.’ It has become a swear word used to pigeonhole music featuring elements of non-Western cultures. Either any kind of music is ‘world music,’ or none. So, there is no use for this term. At least, as long as no Martian musicians step onto the scene.” We sit around a small makeshift coffee table. The conversation is collaborative and improvisational, moving from Ornette Coleman to Curt Sachs, from the politics of love to the pitfalls of area studies. Modirzadeh often inverts the ethnographic gaze. He asks me about my experience teaching world music.

“Well, it’s often this area studies approach,” I say. “You study gamelan and it’s pure gamelan. You study...”

¹¹² After several years, the department finally approved Modirzadeh’s strategic rebranding of the program. The semantic shift from “world” to “creative/world” is a small but deliberate effort to unsettle the disciplinary boundaries and the Eurocentric epistemologies that define ethnomusicological discourse. The linking of world and creative music also reflects a more global vision of jazz based in a lineage of black radicalism—a history often overlooked in conventional jazz studies programs.

Modirzadeh cuts me off. “Those are the lasting vestiges of colonialism, you know. Putting these people in boxes. Colonies basically.” He laughs.

“No, but it’s true, in the sense that there’s this fascination with the Other.”

“We own this. There is the gamelan room. There is this room, there’s that room...”

“Well now at UCLA there is an intercultural ensemble, and they’re trying to break down that paradigm,” I say. But in the classes and workshops I’ve taught as a TA, it was always like, ‘oh you are going to learn this panpipe thing, then you are going to learn this gamelan thing.’ It’s cool I suppose. The students get excited because they’ve never heard anything like that.” Modirzadeh nods in agreement.

“What’s funny about this is that it is not all one or the other. Obviously, it’s better to have separate rooms to recognize these deep and narrow traditions. All of that has to come first, because after all, where would we be without tradition? We know that without all that tradition, without all that history, without all those particularities, we would just be spinning out. So that’s why now is the time to come back around and look at them and say, ‘well, how can all of this make sense to one person.’ There has to be something that is working that goes beyond boundaries.”¹¹³

By acknowledging the importance of cultural particularity and the “deep and narrow traditions” we teach as ethnomusicologists, Modirzadeh mitigates accusations of universalism attributed to chromodal theory. And yet, Modirzadeh doesn’t place himself

¹¹³ Modirzadeh, February 2017.

within, or accept an academic orthodoxy. Instead, he highlights an enduring area studies mentality that treats culture as an artifact of ethnographic collection. His reference to ethnomusicological “boxes” links the cataloging of musical traditions to a broader containment of racialized bodies at the discipline’s comparative foundation.

Modirzadeh’s implicit critique is ethnomusicology’s ongoing investment in the Western colonial project and the need to construct more creative and inclusive pedagogies.

Noah Dissevoy has called for an ethical decolonial pedagogy based in global epistemologies of the dispossessed. He describes the creation of both “curriculums against domination,” a decolonial education “oriented against the epistemic and cultural violence of Eurocentrism,” as well as “pedagogies of lovingness,” that are “committed to building global solidarity based on non-dominative principles of coexistence and kindredness” (2010: 285). These decolonial approaches are at the core of Modirzadeh’s pedagogical orientation. In this next section, I explore the work of institutional decolonization through an ethnographic exploration of Modirzadeh’s intercultural workshop at the California Jazz Conservatory in Berkeley, California. I hope this close reading offers a ground-level view of the pitfalls and possibilities of intercultural improvisation in the classroom.

Listening in the Break

I spot Modirzadeh from across the street. He is Monk-like: Long black pea coat, tightly trimmed beard, dark glasses, and a Moroccan fez-like hat. Close friends call him Fez. I help carry his horn into the California Jazz Conservatory (CJC), a non-profit music academy in downtown Berkeley where Modirzadeh is teaching a class on intercultural

practice. Founded in 1997, the Jazz Conservatory, formerly the Jazz School, is the only institution in the US with a year-round jazz program. The CJC prepares its students for a performance career in an increasingly multi-generic musical world. While learning core jazz repertoire, students are exposed to a variety of global musics including blues, rock, fusion, and various “world” traditions.

We run into Mark Levine, the iconic jazz pianist and pedagogue who codified bebop practices for a new generation of college-educated musicians beginning in the 1980s. Levine’s system is a conventional jazz theory approach adopted at even the most progressive jazz schools such as the CJC. Ken Prouty has written about the aesthetic limitations of the jazz curricular system, in which teachers “emphasize harmonic and melodic materials, the application of chords to scales, the use and development of improvisational language through the use of patterns and transcriptions, and the performance of standard repertoire based in bebop, hard bop, and to a lesser extent, Dixieland, fusion, and jazz-rock” (2008: 28). For Modirzadeh, these approaches represent a “colonial continuum,” or a value system based in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Western European harmony. Such ethnocentric ideologies, he argues, create separable “sound-structures” divorced from their historical and cultural contexts. But rather than abandoning European theory, Modirzadeh advocates for music curricula that combines both Western and non-Western systems. In doing so, he aims to “empower students and allow for more original creations based on specific cultural abstractions” (Barreto and Modirzadeh 2015: 32).

While Levine runs a two-hour jazz harmony workshop across the hall, Modirzadeh is teaching “Jazz and Intercultural Practice,” a semester-long course that explores the cross-cultural application of non-Western musical traditions in jazz.¹¹⁴ Designed by Modirzadeh, the class is now part of the core history curriculum and a requirement of all CJC majors. Students apply core theoretical concepts through hands-on practice. For the first two weeks, Modirzadeh guides students through the fundamentals of chromodality, using his academic articles as a critical launching point. He then introduces various cross-cultural concepts through specific exercises including circle of 5ths, intervallic gravity, pentatonicism, and idiomatic transformation. In one three-week section, the students translated Mamoud Zoufonoun’s recordings and handwritten transcriptions to their instruments, much like Modirzadeh did over thirty years ago. In another segment, Modirzadeh created a “cradle mode” comprised of various augmented seconds that students used to improvise over John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps,” one of the most harmonically complex tunes in the jazz repertoire. He calls the exercise “Makam Steps,” a clever Afro Arab amalgam. In figure 5.1, we can see a copy of Modirzadeh’s handwritten exercise; a simple lead sheet in 6/8 with chord changes and a bass line used to interpolate the harmonic rhythm of the tune. Percussionist Dillon Vado, who took the course in his senior year, was particularly inspired by this exercise and created a play-

¹¹⁴ Modirzadeh uses the terms intercultural and cross-cultural somewhat interchangeably. But he is ambivalent about their abstract use in a classroom, a context that he argues differs “from those source situations that inspire such terminology in the first place.” Ultimately, he questions the very notion of “culture” as a Eurocentric analytic. “I came back to cross-cultural. It used to be intercultural for me. First time I heard ‘transcultural’ was from Miya Masaoka. Then of course in the 90s, we have multicultural... Well, now you see, the whole thing is I think Western, in the sense that we’re here with this dialogue, it’s kind of going up into that house” (February 2017).

along track on his keyboard for personal practice. The track isn't anything special; a midi piano patch with a monotonous hi-hat click. But its sparse texture provides the groundwork for chromodal exploration, allowing Vado to craft a personal intercultural language in keeping with Coltrane and Modirzadeh's expansive creative vision.¹¹⁵

The image shows a handwritten musical score titled "MAKAM STEPS". At the top, there is a staff with the title and a treble clef. Below it, a saxophone line is written in a single staff with a key signature of two flats and a common time signature. The notes are connected by a long slur, with the text "cradle-mode" written below. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves. The upper staff contains a series of chords: Bb7, D7, Eb7, Fb7, Ab7, Gb7, Eb7, F#7, Ab7, F7, Bb7. The lower staff contains a bass line with notes corresponding to the chords above. At the bottom of the score, there are three numbered instructions: I. OPEN and CLOSE on CRADLE-MODE, II. Set-up Eb Blowing on Bass Line, III. PLAY changes going out.

Figure 5.1: “Makam Steps” lead sheet, courtesy of Hafez Modirzadeh



Media 5.1: “Makam Steps” play-along, courtesy of Dillon Vado

¹¹⁵ According to Vado, Modirzadeh later taught “Makam Steps” to a jazz combo at UCLA’s Herbie Hancock Institute (formerly the Monk Institute). The accomplished improvisers, who could no doubt navigate the complex tune with ease, were struck by the newfound sense of freedom—a testament to the liberatory potential of musical systems such as chromodality and the LCC (Dillon Vado, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, March 19, 2019).

Several scholars have written about the role of improvisation in creating alternative pedagogies (Borgo 2007; Heble and Laver 2016; Heble and Waterman 2008; Solis and Nettle 2009). Gabriel Solis (2016) describes improvisation as a situational and embodied form that offers a way out of the “ossified egocentric canons and hierarchies that have long structured music education,” particularly through the social intimacies of free jazz. Similarly, Modirzadeh’s pedagogy embodies a situational and relational approach that disrupts narrow jazz canons. Dillon Vado, who first met Modirzadeh at a Bay Area summer jazz camp after high school, remembers hanging out after class just to be in Modirzadeh’s presence and absorb his ideas. “That class just caught me at a good time,” he told me. “I was ready to digest and absorb the information that he was trying to present, and the mindset that he was trying to present.” For Vado, the course exposed him to new musical traditions and practices in ways that altered his creative approach.

In one semester, he introduces us to all this stuff about Persian music, Chinese music, Japanese shakuhachi; all these different world traditions that otherwise some random white dude from the Bay Area know nothing about. And to me, those ideas are still sifting around in there somewhere, even if I don’t know in depth anything about those cultures. There’s something to be learned from each individual experience, and probably because of that, it’s influenced my composing, it’s influenced my improvising.¹¹⁶

Vado’s reflection highlights the pitfalls and potentials of intercultural pedagogy. In some ways, the crash course presented various world musics disembodied from their cultural context. Vado could then absorb these different sounds into his own modern jazz

¹¹⁶ Dillon Vado, 2019.

tool kit through his privileges as “some random white dude.” But the class also exposed Vado to a more global conception of improvisation. Modirzadeh’s inclusion of Persian, Chinese, and Japanese music expanded the narrow aesthetic value systems of conventional jazz curricula. It also provided a glimpse into traditions that could be examined in more depth through personal study. Outside the classroom, Vado has also begun to perform with Modirzadeh and others in the AIR community, creating a tangible connection with an embodied Afro Asian past while absorbing a more chromodal mindset that altered his compositional and improvisational approach. Despite the dangers of appropriation, the workshop thus offered Vado a creative alternative to the rigid canonical histories and classroom hierarchies plaguing jazz pedagogy and practice.

Not all the students were as enthusiastic with the course. Modirzadeh described his own frustration with previous classes, who exhibited a lack of interest or even disdain for his pedagogical approach. Vado remembers many colleagues complaining about the course and its lack of practicality. “A lot of my friends and people that I know from the school were talking shit on that class,” he told me. “And I had met Hafez before, and I was like, ‘really?’ It didn’t line up for me. I can’t imagine having a bad experience hanging with a guy like that. Because I took his class and I fucking loved it.” Vado’s enthusiasm illustrates his openness and interest in expanding the aesthetic parameters of what constitutes “jazz.” Perhaps the other students didn’t have the mindset to absorb Modirzadeh’s more esoteric theories. This aversion to chromodal concepts may have emerged from a narrow jazz conservatory ideology based in prescribed musical aesthetics and rigid student-teacher binaries. For some, Modirzadeh’s mystical approach and

alternative teaching style were simply illegible, and only facilitated a retreat into the “ossified canons” of the conventional institutional format.

On December 4, 2016, I attended one of Modirzadeh’s workshops at the CJC. Unlike prior years, the students were engaged and inspired. Eight or so jazz majors sit at loosely arranged desks. They are mostly white, male instrumentalists. I sit to the side of the room but often participate in group discussion, blurring the line between researcher and student. This week’s assignment is a preliminary exercise in what Modirzadeh calls “musical transformation.” Students were asked to find two YouTube examples representative of disparate musical traditions and layer the tracks together in real-time to hear their potential for “idiomatic transformation.” In a short accompanying essay, they described the creative process and situated their examples in relevant cultural and historical contexts. The project isn’t about creating a static composition based in pre-formed samples. Rather, Modirzadeh describes it as a laboratory to imagine sounds that might not but could relate. By transforming our perception of two independent sonic entities, a third space is created in the listener’s imagination, what Modirzadeh describes as a “point” or “portal.” As he writes,

When two or more idioms’ acoustical and rhythmic sensibilities are practiced together without compromising the integrity of each, distinctions are enhanced at a focal point rather than blurred, creating another context that sustains rather than dissolves traditional elements, ultimately allowing for all to flourish both within and beyond the boundaries of culture (2011: 10).

Here lies the core of chromodal pedagogy; a conscious musical crossing that expands traditional practices while retaining cultural particularities through a focused articulation of difference. Far from a Schechnerian utopia.

The exercise involves a degree of creative mediation. Acting as sound engineer, Modirzadeh first plays each example individually to orient our ears to the musical tradition's "sound ideal," or sonic crystallization of its socio-cultural history. He then plays both clips simultaneously, adjusting the volume in order to balance competing sounds and allow each voice to weave together. Some things clash. Martin Daugherty has written about a "layered listening" praxis through the metaphor of the "auditory palimpsest," in which "sounds from multiple sources occur simultaneously" (2017: 73). A byproduct of the palimpsest includes "masking effects," or the "complete drowning out of one sound by another" (Ibid.). Similarly, the transformation exercise involves a layered listening in which certain sonic voices are masked through uneven timbral or rhythmic densities. One student combines a studio version of Gregorian plainchant with a live recording of traditional Haitian drumming and singing. The dense Afro-Caribbean rhythms and voices overpower the straight-tone timbre of Renaissance polyphony in a noisy sonic mass.

This exercise could be seen as a digital pastiche that mirrors a genealogy of Western colonial listening. Jodi Durst, a white female student, pairs what she describes as "Zulu drumming" and "Native American flute." She contrasts the "ceremonial" and "energetic" Zulu drumming with a "gentle" flute that "reflects the Native American idea of being one with nature." She mentions the artist Mary Youngblood, a Grammy Award-

Winning half-Aleut and half-Seminole flutist. But the actual musicians seem irrelevant. Instead, the isolated tracks become essentialized stand-ins for monolithic cultural forms, whose sonic essence we consume through our role as digital curators. Tim Taylor has written about the world music industry’s “explorer narrative,” in which Western artist-collectors “[head] off to mysterious places looking for mysterious music” (1997: 28). Here, the mysterious is brought much closer to home; within the infinite delocalized space of YouTube. That the majority of the students are white only amplifies these racialized power asymmetries.

But these particular tracks also embody a resistant political consciousness. Modirzadeh asks Durst to explain why she paired these songs and how they relate—he often encourages students to form a personal and creative connection to their unique sonic choices. Durst says that she picked the flute because of the recent Dakota Pipeline Protest and the history of Native genocide, which she relates to colonial rule in South Africa. Earlier that day, Modirzadeh said that Standing Rock was one of the few places that he would give his life. Durst’s linkage of Apartheid and Native genocide points to a parallel history of settler colonialism, and the hope—however naïve and shaped by essentialist tropes—for a different kind of sonic encounter. In media 5.2, we can hear a free-metered flute floating above a lilting drum with periodic pauses and the faint sound of children’s voices. Distant worlds fold into one another.



Media 5.2: “Native” flute and Zulu drums, recording by Dhiren Panikker

Worldbeat fusions often feature heavily produced tracks in which unfamiliar sounds are used as exotic fodder for a primarily Western compositional style. Louise Meintjes has written about Paul Simon's work as studio producer on the contentious cross-cultural album, *Graceland*. Despite the presence of collaborative elements, the track features an ethos of "noncollaboration" through the spatial foregrounding of Simon and issues of creative control endemic to the commercial music industry (1990: 47). A focus on the creative process unsettles our role as sonic collectors of the ancient. Rather than a clean fusion of musical elements, Modirzadeh emphasizes an aesthetic of dissonance based in Afro-diasporic conceptions of sound. "It's not always about making things work," he reminds us. "It's about putting things together. And you understand more about something by putting two different things together and with time and patience, allowing them to co-exist. Sometimes they come together easily, but once they coexist, that's just beautiful in and of itself, the essence of resistance. There's always resistance going on. The resistance not to die, for example, to keep growing. It's about complementary resistance." This attention to the creative process of recombination mirrors black improvisatory approaches, in which ethical issues of appropriation are tempered by a collaborative listening praxis. Thus, Modirzadeh's emphasis on sonic resistance is more than a metaphor for utopian coexistence, but a decolonial strategy for the development of what he calls a "sound society" (2011).

A decolonial sound emerges in the break. Guitarist Julian Kucera combines an odaiko drum and shamisen duet with blues singer and slide guitarist Son House's acapella version of "Grinnin' in Your Face." The pairing is unexpected. The taiko piece

is a fast instrumental with linear shamisen melodies and recurring odaiko hits in the lower register. Meanwhile, “Grinnin’ in Your Face” features House’s wavering blues verse and falsetto scoops atop irregular rhythmic clapping and an underlying message of black love and self-empowerment. Modirzadeh starts the taiko piece but accidentally plays the wrong Sun House track. “Not that one,” Kucera yells. Modirzadeh triggers the right song just as a rising shamisen melody builds into a dramatic odaiko break. Sun House fills the space in perfect time (0:08). We all laugh. An Afro Asian aesthetic emerges; shamisen riffs respond to Sun House’s grainy verse as a driving odaiko pulse intersects House’s lilting claps in cross-rhythmic synchronicity. “Ornette called that unison,” Modirzadeh tells us. “He said that you’re in unison when you are going in the same direction. You might not be doing the same thing. But when it happens like this, it’s really uncanny.” Modirzadeh then relates this musical encounter to the intercultural work of Mark Izu, Anthony Brown, and other AIR artists, who were similarly connecting diverse musical traditions in a more live setting. In media 5.2, we can hear this brief moment of Afro Asian kinship. Listen for Modirzadeh’s technical flub and improvised response, and how that creates an uncanny moment of congruence. There is tension, a push and pull of time and tone. But there’s also complementary resistance, a sonic focal point of difference made audible in the collective space of listening.



Media 5.3: Sun House and taiko break, recording by Dhiren Panikker

Alex Rodriguez has written about the ethical role of intercultural improvisation in the academy. He describes the cultivation of core ethical actions including “aural openness,” “inclusivity and collective purpose in group interaction,” “cultural humility and epistemological curiosity,” and the creation of “golden moments,” or “flashes of musical beauty that arise from group performance” (2015: 185-187). These ethical actions encompass what he calls “omni-musicality,” a multi-genre approach that “transforms the world music ensemble format through musical improvisation, allowing participants to engage across styles by listening to each other in rehearsal and performance” (Ibid.). Similarly, our exercise was grounded in an ethic of openness, humility, and curiosity. But our fleeting “golden moment” emerged not through group performance, but a collective listening presence receptive to improvised failure. Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz (2013) describe failure as an indispensable component of improvised practice that nurtures an “ethics of co-creation.” Modirzadeh’s apparent technical failure thus created the conditions of possibility for the “golden moment” to emerge. If he had played the correct Sun House track, we wouldn’t have experienced the seamless break that bridged the tracks in our listening imagination. Ultimately, Modirzadeh’s improvisational sensibilities and our aural openness provided the intersubjective framework for the intercultural encounter to emerge.

But the moment still might not have happened. The experience could have been interrupted by several external variables including the physical space, technology, or “masking effects” of the music itself. When Modirzadeh tried the same exercise during his world music survey course at SF State, many of the examples didn’t gel. The large

multipurpose classroom, bleacher-style seating, and grainy speaker system obscured the musical nuances of each track. Moreover, the students simply weren't invested in the listening process—their distracted half-hearing occluded the potential for idiomatic transformation. The CJC's small room and egalitarian setup, however, generated a more intimate acoustic space. Our collective listening presence ultimately became the heuristic for the efficacy of the displaced intercultural encounter. I asked Modirzadeh what he heard in that perfectly aligned crossing of the Son House and taiko track. While acknowledging our subjective experiences, he pointed to a collective third space emerging through shared listening:

Again, it depends on the listener, what they signify from it or just how it vibrates inside their skull or inside their ears. There is something mysterious that goes on. I think whatever one person gets from what they hear, that's interesting, but what to me is more interesting is how a collective of people hear something, hear two things together and what is that third thing that resonates in all of them. That becomes more than a personal truth. It's like wow, wait a minute, something has illuminated here. We cannot deny it. We heard something. That was uncanny! And everybody feels equalized. It didn't matter what age you were. And then you just start digging the fact that we're all here together in a good vibe. And then we can go out in peace.

Liz Przybylski has written about the cultivation of a “critical decolonial consciousness” through the use of bilingual hip hop in the classroom. Students create their own Indigenous language music through a “meaningful interaction with popular culture” in ways that “disrupt this traditional/modern dyad” (2018: 393). Such an approach is based in not only “personal mental experience,” but a “two-pronged approach” including “sovereign thinking and group engagement in a literal

decolonization process” (Ibid.). Our exercise might not have generated the same kind of “critical decolonial consciousness.” It may have reinforced quite the opposite; a colonial consciousness based in a detached, primarily white engagement with the Other. But as Modirzadeh argues, such a critique ignores chromodality’s role as a decolonial praxis operating outside Western analytic binaries of self/Other. For Modirzadeh, the exercise functioned “not as participation in the culture being heard, but rather, participation in hearing the sonic representation thereof,” a collaborative space that is “not colonizing but rather resisting colonization via the inclusion of all without claim of ownership.” Through sovereign group thinking and listening, our intercultural praxis thus generated a decolonial space that unsettled narrow aesthetic conventions and classroom hierarchies plaguing jazz pedagogy and practice. Perhaps a deeper grounding in socio-cultural contexts and a more deliberate political intention, as Durst’s example sought, would provide the basis for a more “critical decolonial consciousness.”

A decolonial consciousness might also be located in its futurity. Dillon Vado described how the class shifted the way he listened to the sonic world around him. While recording his latest album, he had asked the musicians to record a solo improvisation that would be used as separate interludes between songs. But during post-production, he decided to layer the sax and guitar tracks together. The result was a beautifully interlaced duo that, despite being recorded independently, sounded as if it was performed together. The exercise also influenced the way I began to listen and relate to my ethnographic surroundings. Later that week, I walked through the SF State music department. I noticed multiple sounds billowing from a small row of practice rooms. Normally, I might hear

these disparate voices as unrelated. My ears shifted, noticing the relationships between these disparate sound worlds. In media 5.3, you can hear my grainy soundwalk.

Individual sounds bleed from their solitary spaces and enter a more composite sonority: opera long tones intersecting with clunky pop piano rhythms; out-of-tune trumpet warm-ups blending with bluesy riffs atop the steady click of my footsteps. A multi-genre soundscape cuts across aesthetic and institutional boundaries within the listening body.



Media 5.4: SF State soundwalk, recording by Dhiren Panikker

In this next section, I turn to another potential decolonial site. I trace the significance of SF State to AIR's musical and political work through an autoethnographic reading of my experience as a performer in the 2017 ImprovisAsians! Festival. In doing so, I return to the politics of Third World Solidarity and the hope of intercultural improvisation as a critical decolonial praxis in the post-9/11 era.

ImprovisAsians!: Toward a Decolonial Pedagogy and Praxis

Improvisation is a variance on form, fluid and fueled by the same creative energies that move life...It signifies a rising consciousness that can disintegrate the academy's aperture through the applied pressure of a newly liberated artistic scholarship. Is it possible then for improvisation, as a study inherently subversive towards the very parameters that set such up, to carry enough empowering potential to usher in an ultimate finality for institutional boundary altogether?"

—Modirzadeh (2011: 15)

The hold here is the hold in the slave ship but it is also the hold that we have on reality and fantasy, the hold they have on us and the hold we decide to forego on the other, preferring instead to touch, to be with, to love. If there is no church in the wild, if there is study rather than knowledge production, if there is a way of being together in brokenness, if there is an undercommons, then we must find our way to it. And it will not be there where the wild things are, it will be a place where refuge is not necessary, and you will find that you were already in its along.

–Halberstam (2018: 19)

I sit with Modirzadeh on a concrete bench outside the Cesar Chavez Student Center at SF State. A mural of the Latino activist sits alongside a portrait of Malcolm X, an image of complementary resistance forged in Third World Solidarity. A depiction of the African continent frames Malcolm X’s iconic call for liberation, “our objective is complete freedom, justice, and equality by any means necessary.” The cartoonish murals conceal a long history of political activism. SF State was the site of the Third World Liberation Front Strikes (TWLF), in which working-class students of color fought for the minority inclusion in a Eurocentric academy. Modirzadeh points to a hilly patch of green lawn that tanks were said to have rolled down to suppress the activists some fifty years ago. Their multi-reverberations echo in stone and earth.

Asian Improv aRts continues in this subversive legacy. On Modirzadeh’s invitation, I joined AIR for the 2017 ImprovisAsians! Festival, an annual series of intercultural performances and discussions held on the campus of SF State. The gathering would provide a critical space for the work of institutional decolonization, and my intimate entry point into their “sound come-unity.” In this section, I map the work of ImprovisAsians! through three interlinked narratives: 1) the festival’s origins and

relationship to post-9/11 politics 2) the sociality of rehearsal, and; 3) the decolonial potentials of performance. In the last two sections, I employ experimental writing techniques including performative autoethnography and intervocal writing. I intersperse critical concepts on improvisation, listening, and decolonization, avoiding distanced academic cant in an effort to destabilize the politics of knowledge production.

Beginnings

Founded in 2004, the ImprovisAsians! Festival serves as a bridge between the institution and local communities. Concerts feature large intercultural ensembles comprised of SF State faculty and students from the Afro-Cuban ensemble, Filipino Kulintang, and Modirzadeh's creative music ensemble. AIR affiliated artists often join the curated performances. In addition to weekday concerts, the festival also includes informal lecture-performances in Modirzadeh's world music classes and roundtable discussions led by core AIR members. Francis Wong describes this approach as a "discursive initiative," or a practice based in both performance and collective participation in the discourse.¹¹⁷ A discursive initiative reflects AIR's commitment to an African American artist-scholar paradigm. It also provides a creative space for AIR artists to articulate their role as "public intellectuals," who, as Deborah Wong argues, speak to the racialization of knowledge and "the Whiteness of the high theories that shape nearly everything we are able to talk about in the academy, including music and performance" (2004: 302).

¹¹⁷ Francis Wong, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, March 26, 2019.

ImprovisAsians! emerged out of a particular need. Initially, it served as a transplant for the Asian American Jazz Festival, the main venue for AIR artists to present their work to the broader public throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. After the closure of the Asian Art Museum's Golden Gate Park location—the festival's primary home—AIR sought a new space to feature their music outside local community spaces in Chinatown and Japantown. SF State was an ideal alternative. The costs for self-producing a week-long festival are high and often fell on the musicians themselves. Holding the concerts at SF State meant a centralized venue, built-in audience, and access to critical resources. The weekday concerts in Knuth Hall corresponded to the music department's "recital hour" required of all music majors, and an engineer would be on hand to facilitate tech setup and sound. And yet, ImprovisAsians! would operate outside the institutional establishment. For Modirzadeh, the festival served as a "guerrilla institute," that each year, "would surface and strike on stage and in classrooms, almost always off the radar of the rest of music faculty (who never attended anyway)."¹¹⁸

AIR has a personal investment in SF State. Modirzadeh has been a staple in the institution for the last twenty years. Wong attended the school as an undergraduate, and later served as guest faculty in the music department in the late 1990s. John-Carlos Perea was one of Wong's students. A bassist, Native American flutist, and composer, Perea performed in several of the early ImprovisAsians! concerts and would later co-curate the festival along with Wong and Modirzadeh. Perea has a personal link to the school. His father served as one of the few indigenous administrators during a period of minority

¹¹⁸ Hafez Modirzadeh, email correspondence with Dhiren Panikker, May 22, 2019.

inclusion following the TWLF strikes. John-Carlos continues in his father's legacy, serving as Associate Professor of American Indian Studies (AIS) in the College of Ethnic Studies. Perea's role in the institution is thus doubly critical. Like Modirzadeh, he expands bounded notions of Asian American identity through his presence as indigenous artist-scholar. At the same time, his work across pan-Native and Afro-diasporic musical forms introduces issues of indigeneity that Tuck and Wang (2012) describe as necessary for any discourse on decolonization.

SF State's decolonial history undergirds AIR's intimate connection to the institution. When I asked Francis Wong why they staged the festival at SF State, his answer was simple. "The reason was because of the Third World Strikes," he said. The 1968 Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) strikes was a multi-ethnic coalition of student groups on the campus of SF State and UC Berkeley who demanded minority access and inclusion in the university. The longest student protests in the nation's history, the TWLF strikes led to important institutional shifts including increased minority representation, the hiring of faculty of color, and the development of Ethnic Studies curricula—SF State's College of Ethnic Studies is the only college of its kind in the entire world. But the TWLF instituted more than structural change. As the Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective argues, the importance of the TWLF model is "not only its historical contribution to the disruption and rearticulation of the white university but also its crystallization of an insurgent narrative structure that facilitates the adjoining of vastly disparate human oppressions and rebellions into an ostensible totality of shared, radical agency against empire, conquest, criminalization, and enslavement" (Elia et al. 2016: 2).

The move to SF State corresponds with a radical shift in AIR's political mission. The 1980s and 1990s were important moments for articulating a distinctly Asian American musical agenda in response to growing liberal multiculturalism. By the early 2000s, however, an ethnically-defined framework simply wasn't enough. "We didn't really need an Asian American Jazz Festival in San Francisco," Francis Wong recalled. "At a certain point, Asian American composer-musicians were getting presented all around town, so we really didn't need one festival. To me, it didn't make any more sense to be doing it, because we didn't need a central presenter of Asian American musicians. So basically, we were calling it a win. We had achieved the goal of that festival." Wong's reflection on AIR's "win" marks the culmination of a particular kind of community organizing based in Asian American coalitional politics. Indeed, the collective was already operating on the "margins of the margins," outside conventional Asian American narratives through alliances with African Americans and non-East Asians such as Iyer and Modirzadeh. But 9/11 would mark a decisive turn towards a broader conceptualization of what Asian America might look and sound like. As Wong noted, "It meant that those of us that had history in the movement, we were looking for certain work that was unfinished and needed to be done, which was linking the mass incarceration of early immigrants to folks from Iran or Palestine." Wong cited non-East Asians including Mamoud Zoufounoun, John-Carlos Perea, and Danny Kalanduyan, whose presence at early festivals highlighted the intersection of Native genocide, mass incarceration, and Islamophobia. In doing so, AIR built on the unfinished work of the

TWLF by forging an “insurgent narrative” based in shared agency and a radical critique of empire, criminalization, and enslavement.¹¹⁹

The first ImprovisAsians! Festival in 2004 sounded these critical linkages. As Wong recalled, AIR featured a roundtable conversation with Andy Nozaka, a Nissei photographer known for his historic photos of African American jazz greats from the 1950s and 1960s. During his slideshow presentation, Nozaka juxtaposed images of John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk alongside Modirzadeh and Wong. Atop the photo stills, Wong and Modirzadeh spoke with Nozaka about the growing political crisis. As Wong noted, “Hafez told a story of one of the first phone calls that he received after 9/11 from Andy saying, ‘Hafez, you know, we’ve been through this...I’ve been through this. So, whatever you need, you got.’” Later, Modirzadeh described another phone call from African American saxophonist John Handy, aka “Handyman,” one of the first jazz history teachers at SF State and a sideman on Charles Mingus’ historic 1959 recording, *Mingus Ah Um*. “So, Handyman calls up Hafez,” Wong recalled, “and says, ‘look, whatever you need—you need a place to stay, you need a place to chill out, I’m there for you.’” For Wong, these personal connections were a critical response to new issues arising in the aftermath of 9/11. “So that’s the theme in some ways, the foundation,” he told me. “On the one hand we could say, yeah, we were engaging in discursive initiative. But really, what we were trying to do was respond to the crisis in the world in a post-9/11 context.

¹¹⁹ For more on AIR and Bay Area activism, see Wong’s MA thesis (2017).

So that meant it's not just about putting on concerts. It's not really just following this idea of an Asian American space. But there are specific issues we were trying to look at."¹²⁰

These brief encounters speak to the politics of post-9/11 community building. AIR's sonic, visual, and discursive initiative expanded the boundaries of a conventional Asian American rubric no longer sufficient in a post-9/11 context. Nozaka's slideshow, for instance, reveals an interracial genealogy that connects black jazz greats with improvisers across a spectrum of "Asianness." But these connections represent more than a displaced Afro Asian imaginary. Nozaka and Handyman's response to Modirzadeh in a time of personal and political crisis highlights the familial intimacies of post-9/11 coalitional politics. While acknowledging the specific issues facing the post-9/11 Brown subject, AIR's recognition of a broader shared struggle points to the solidarities linking black, Brown, and yellow. At the same time, the masculine nature of these formations reveals the inheritance of gendered histories that continue to constrain solidarity discourse. This complex narrative thus encapsulates the utopian potential and gendered pitfalls of post-9/11 Brown community building heard throughout my dissertation.

This insurgent narrative didn't take place on the streets or the revolutionary sites central to "Third World Left" activism (Pulido 2006). Rather, it quietly sounded in the confines of the university, a site of fugitivity and sociality that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe as the "undercommons," or the "downlow, lowdown underground, maroon community of the university" where the "work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong" (2013: 26). I now turn to my

¹²⁰ Francis Wong, 2019.

own experience as a performer in the 2017 ImprovisAsians! Festival. I move through various spaces and subjectivities; from rehearsal to stage, performer to listener, artist to scholar and back again. I hope this genre of decolonial writing captures some of the spirit and sociality I experienced in AIR's "maroon community," as much as that space evades critical containment.

Practice

We all crowd into Hafez's office, which serves as a make-shift rehearsal space. I sit at a little spinet that Hafez just re-tuned with his own microtonal calculations. He calls it the "aboriginal piano," referring to the distorted sound world hidden inside its European veneer. "It can decolonize the 88-keyed beast," he tells me. I grasp the keys and listen to the decolonized sound. It feels wrong. Half steps stretch and compress. Octaves beat. I think of Vijay Iyer, who sat in this very spot five years ago, plodding through the aboriginal tones for Hafez's album, *Post-Chromodal Out!* Vijay's trace lingers. Spectrums of Brown percolate through black and white.

John-Carlos sets up behind me. He is no stranger to this space. He opened this year's festival with "Improvising Home," a multi-movement improvisational narrative about family, identity, and Bay Area acoustic ecology grounded in the urban American Indian experience. Here, John-Carlos plays electric bass. I can't see him, but his large amp vibrates in my ear. When I can't hear my own voice, I rely on his sound to ground my playing. I think about what Amir once told me, how we are always playing inside each other's sounds. Separability is a myth of (white) European racial grammar.

Study

What you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it “study” is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present.

–Moten and Harney (2013: 110)

Hafez sets up a beat-up drum kit in the opposite corner for Royal Hartigan. Percussionist, composer, and ethnomusicologist, Royal has spent the last four decades studying drum traditions from West Africa to the Philippines, India, China, and Japan. He is white. But he isn't the conventional Western explorer collecting scraps of the exotic. Royal spends most summers teaching, playing, and studying with master artists across Ghana and the Philippines. Before every concert, he speaks the names of his teachers in order to honor their presence and draw their spirit into the traditional rhythms he plays. Royal is in his seventies, frail but extremely warm with a deep gaze and musical energy that eclipses most young players. He and Hafez go way back. They both attended Wesleyan University in the 1980s and led the Improvised Music Studies program at San Jose State University before its racialized collapse.

Saxophonist and shakuhachi player Masaru Koga sets up next to Royal along the back wall. Friends call him Mas. He studied with Royal and Hafez at San Jose State and now plays beside them as a fellow musician and close friend. Committed to intercultural crossings, Mas blends a modern jazz sound with a deep Japanese aesthetic. Saxophonist

Will Berg joins the makeshift horn section. He is filling in for Francis Wong, who had serious health issues. As an undergraduate jazz major, Will plays with a fire that belies his quiet demeanor. He also studies with Hafez privately and I can hear Hafez in his young sound. Chromodal generations.

We run Royal's arrangement of "Original Faubus Fables," Mingus' wry critique of Arkansas governor Orval Faubus's racist defense of segregation in 1957. Sixty years later, its urgency remains. Royal hands out a copy of his own lyrics that replace Faubus, Rockefeller, and Eisenhower with Trump, Bannon, and Zimmerman. Genealogies of white supremacy. Hafez doesn't want us to sing it. "That's Mingus' thing," he says. "It's about that time, like 1959. We now need a resolution more than a revolution. I'd rather read Rumi," he says. Mas nods. Francis later tells me that Hafez's apolitical stance was a tactical move, a conscious way of navigating the racialized "state."

Santurist Faraz Minooei knocks on the door. Born in Tehran, Faraz studied with the late tar master, Mohammad-Reza Lofti. After emigrating to the US in the early 2000s, he worked closely with Hafez at SF State. Faraz and I have known each other for ten years. We were graduate students in UC Irvine's MFA program in Integrated Composition, Improvisation, and Technology. As the only students of color, we were both engaging in the speculative study Harney and Moten describe. I remember showing him boogie-woogie licks on the piano that he incorporated into *dastgah*-infused blues figurations for *santur*. In another jam, we played a free improvisation for piano, *santur*, live electronics, and break dancer. And in my first year at UC Riverside, we performed an

improvised duo at the annual World Music Festival; our decolonial sound blurring the geo-cultural silos such concerts have come to represent in the academy.

Faraz is joined by Sirvan Manhoobi, an oud player from Tehran who recently settled in Los Angeles. Sirvan wasn't supposed to be on the gig, but Hafez asks him to sit in on one tune. Faraz often surprises Hafez with new musicians. "It's a mutual kind of trust," he later tells me. "I trust Faraz, and he knows that I will be open to it." Faraz and Sirvan set up in front of the door, blocking the entrance. We co-opt the space in a collective study across geography and generation. The sounds seep through the walls and underneath the door, floating through the academic halls in fugitive disguise.

We run Hafez's arrangement of Thelonius Monk's "Reflections." The tune reflects the softer side of Monk; poetic melodies and tonal harmonies within a standard AABA structure. The piece was our reflection on the late Kulintang master Danny Kalanduyun, a staple at SF State who brought *Mindanaoan* music to the academy in the early 2000s. Our entire concert, entitled "Resolution of the Soul," would be a dedication to Danny's life.¹²¹ Everyone in the room knew Danny, and our pay from the gig would go to his family fund. Faraz pulls out his phone and shows me a picture of him performing with Danny and Mahmoud Zoufonoun almost ten years ago. I didn't know Danny but feel like I'm playing with him too. His resonance is embedded in the physical bodies and spaces that I touch and move through.

¹²¹ "Resolution of the Soul" was a concept that Ornette Coleman described to Hafez Modirzadeh after the two musicians performed at SF Jazz in 2007 (Modirzadeh 2019).



Figure 5.2: Mahmoud Zoufonoun, Faraz Minooei, and Danny Kalanduyan (L-R), 2007, image by Andy Nozaka, courtesy of Faraz Minooei

Faraz opens the tune on *santur*, weaving through the head with microtonal gestures. John-Carlos enters with high octave jumps that cascade into shimmering *santur* rolls and grainy snare fills. John-Carlos is Apache, but he often sings in a Lakota vocal style in keeping with pan-Native aesthetic politics. Sirvan hesitates. He later tells me that this was the first “jazz” tune he ever played. Sirvan finds space between John-Carlos’ piercing vocals and Mas’ shakuhachi fills. I wait and listen. We all come together on the bridge in a dense cluster of sound. I play a heavy bass line and pedaled harmonies over the changes. “Don’t lead, don’t anticipate!” Hafez yells. I pull back. He wants a 12/8 feel on the last A, but I can’t quite hear where Royal is in the time. Royal later tells me that he

couldn't hear me during our entire performance. A decolonial love is relational, it is listening to the Other even when you can't hear.

The last tune is "Naima," Coltrane's poetic dedication to his first wife, a Muslim convert who influenced Trane's spiritual philosophy. Here, it serves as another reflection on and for Danny. The kulintang ensemble will join us, but they couldn't make it to the rehearsal. John-Carlos opens in an acapella Lakota style while doubling on bass. I play microtonal lines against John-Carlos' open bass pedals and Royal's brush work. We practice the ending, which serves as a transition into another kulintang piece. But Royal's phone rings. He puts it on speaker and Hafez crowds around the phone excitedly. I'm not sure who it is. Later, Royal tells me that this was Baomi Butts, a vocalist and colleague from their days teaching together at San Jose State. She wants to hear "Naima." John-Carlos begins the tune again with tenor and shakuhachi fills. I listen. Royal starts singing. Faraz and I join in, quietly humming the melody together. Our voices coalesce in synchronous breath.

Performance

I show up early for the soundcheck at Knuth hall. The space is a typical unglamorous college auditorium: Large block stage, bleacher seating, and long velvety red curtains for sound buffering that give a touch of elegance. The hall serves as the main venue for the music department, hosting regular ensemble performances and student recitals throughout the academic year. Our performance is slotted into the weekly "recital hour," and is both free and open to the public. A sound engineer is present, but we have to do the heavy

lifting ourselves. Mas helps me move the grand piano to stage right. Hafez tilts the piano. “You shouldn’t have your back to the audience or each other,” he tells me.

The setup seems ordinary; piano, bass, and drums forming semi-circle toward the side of the stage. During the “jazz” tunes, Mas and Will stand in a front-line formation facing the audience. But the intercultural ensemble disrupts the conventional jazz spatiality. Faraz and Sirvan setup inside the curved bentside of the piano, forming an expanded Persian rhythm/string section. With the dampers depressed, the microtones of the *santur* and *oud* ring inside the body of the piano. Members of Danny’s Palabuniyan Kulintang ensemble set up on stage left. Kulintang is a pre-colonial instrumental tradition from the Southern province of Maguindinao and performed on a horizontally-arranged series of knobbed gongs. This is the instrument Danny played. One of his senior students, Titania Buchholdt, performs in his place. She is surrounded by an array of accompanying instruments including the suspended *gong agung*, a row of hanging gongs known as *gandingan*, and the *babendil*, a single gong with a sunken boss used as a time-keeper. Members of the Afro-Cuban ensemble are sprinkled between the make-shift group.

Togetherness-in-difference

A sense of togetherness that can transcend the rampant division and fragmentation based on particularist identities, without returning to the old hegemony of an assimilationist, Eurocentric homogeneity.

–Ang (2003: 141)

We all gather backstage before the performance. I’ve met some of the musicians, but there are many unfamiliar faces. We stand in a conjoined circle, layering our hands

on top of one another. Hafez and Royal say a few things in memory of Danny. Royal speaks in both *Akan*, a southern Ghanaian dialect, as well as a Visayan language related to *Tagalog*. I don't know exactly what he said. Royal later tells us that he summoned the ancestral spirits to guide and protect us throughout the performance. I close my eyes. I'm not sure if I felt the spirits come down but the embodied feeling of togetherness is profoundly moving.

We begin "Fables of Faubus" to a small, engaged audience. Hafez listens quietly from the side of the stage. Even without Royal's politicized lyrics, our instrumental take is insurgent. On the last A, Mas plays honking over-blown long tones over the quirky march. I respond with frantic clusters against Royal's snare rolls (2:47). The swung bridge leads into a dramatic break. Form dissolves. Mas enters with choppy altissimo lines against Royal's out-of-time drum fills and percussionist Jimmy Biala's conga fragments. I play dissonant piano rolls under Mas's long tones (3:30). We come together on an Bb minor, our sounds layering together in broken time. Mas plays a screeching Coltranesq solo over Royal's swirling sound (4:22). Mas cues the head, soloing over the form with high register honks and double-time bop licks. A cued break leads into a brief bass solo. I play freely over the bridge. I move through the harmony with dissonant rising chords against Royal and John Carlos' anxious pulse (8:17). I build to a climactic Bb, playing descending Monk-lines against a swung groove that decays into open space (9:07). I gesture to the tune, interspersing the melody with rapid clusters against John-Carlos' anchored bass roots. Will solos over a fast swing that dissolves into the frenetic head (10:10). Genealogies of white supremacy rupture in collective Afro Asian impulse.



Media 5.5: “Fables of Faubus,” recording by Dhiren Panikker

Faraz begins “Reflections” with an incessant Eb. Conga, oud, and bass respond in improvised time. *Santur* rolls infuse the ballad with microtonal nuances of *dastgah-e mahur*. Sirvan responds in *dastgah-nava*, its three-quarter tone second step creating a Monkish rub. Their sounds are stitched together (1:17). I feel the urge to play. Hafez taps me on my shoulder, reminding me to lay out. John-Carlos sings the melody in a low register. Faraz and oud patiently follow, echoing the head atop percussion fills and shakuhachi long tones (1:55). John-Carlos sings the second A in a high Lakota timbre. A swirling sound mass of talking drum-like tom hits, conga, and shekere circulate below (2:42). Monk meets Tehran through an Afro-Caribbean sound world that exceeds its acoustic topography.

We all enter on the bridge. Long bass tones and piano harmonies create a dense sonic texture (3:21). John-Carlos once told me that harmony is like a prison based in power. I pull back, filling the space with Monk-like staccato runs. Hafez cues the melody on soprano over a loose Afro-Cuban 12/8 feel that never quite settles. We vamp over the last two chords. Hafez’s Coltranesq soprano lines against *santur* rolls and a lilting shekere groove (4:33). We fade into *binalig*, a standard rhythmic mode in the kulintang repertoire that features a swung-like motive played on the single-headed *dabakan* (5:40). We move off stage and listen to the kulintang perform a medley of pieces for Danny.



Media 5.6: “Reflections” excerpt, recording by Dhiren Panikker

Listening

When we listen to music, we must refuse the idea that music happens only when the musician enters and picks up an instrument; music is also the anticipation of the performance and the noises of appreciation it generates and the speaking that happens through it and around it, making it and loving it, being in it while listening.

–Halberstam (2013: 8)

During the break, several musicians reflect on Danny’s influence at SF State. “He joined us for many events,” Hafez tells the crowd. “All of us here on the stage, we participated in classrooms. And then music took over kulintang for a number of years. And he had some thirty-plus students, and you could hear the sound in the halls. So, we keep that sound alive.” Titania reflects on Danny’s many awards including the NEA’s National Heritage Fellowship he received in 1995. She describes how he worked as an usher at the Golden Gate theatre in order to make rent before being hired at SF State as a part-time lecturer. Afro-Cuban percussionist John Callaway reflects on love and the blurring of tradition: “What you see here with my cousin and Frank, and all the others, is the legacy of Danny. It was always loving here. The Afro-Cuban ensemble would have rehearsals in the next room, when they’d be rehearsing right there. The door was only a literal door. It was not a figurative door. The cultures always mixed.” Hafez closes by commemorating Francis Wong and the thirty-year legacy of the Asian Improv nation. He pauses to introduce the band but stops. “I think for the first time ever, I’m not going to introduce anyone on this stage, because in a sense we’re all nameless. We all come together and we’re all part of this together.”

The mini-collectives come together during an extended performance of “Naima.” John-Carlos opens the tune with a lyric by Jim Pepper, the Kaw-Muscogee saxophonist known for his own intercultural synthesis in the late 1960s. The dedication is for Danny: “You must not forget me when I’m long gone, because I love you” (0:00). John-Carlos moves into “Naima,” long vocables swell with a slight vibrato against a warm bass sound (1:26). John-Carlos plays a fast-rhythmic ostinato as fluttering drums and quartal piano harmonies fill the space. Hafez plays the head with an urgent soprano sound atop a driving straight-eighth drum groove and Mas and Will’s faint screeches (3:02). We fade into Royal’s extended talking drum solo. The kulintang joins with cyclic pentatonic riffs based on *binalig* (8:03). Hafez enters with microtonal backgrounds that blend with the non-tempered gongs. Faraz, Sirvan, and I follow (8:39). A thick Afro-Cuban groove emerges. We sit in the crowded, resonant space for several minutes. Just as it feels like the energy is fading, we move into “Naima’s” climactic coda, a rising collective of voices (11:30). Nameless yet embodied, we find each other in a rising cloud of sound.



Media 5.7: “Naima,” recording by Dhiren Panikker

Conclusion

Hafez Modirzadeh’s story reveals the pitfalls and potentials of intercultural improvisation in the academy. Modirzadeh’s role as a multi-ethnic artist-scholar places him on the outskirts of both dominant Iranian American narratives and the academic institutions where he has spent most of his musical life. His tepid response in the field of ethnomusicology reveals a latent “colonial continuum” that erases minoritarian voices

and epistemologies. Modirzadeh subverts these trappings by engaging with African American creative legacies. As I have shown, “chromodal discourse,” while appearing to embrace tropes of universalism, builds on a genealogy of black techno-scientific interventions to unsettle raced and gendered discourses of the post-9/11 Brown subject. This speculative theory of practice informs Modirzadeh’s creative pedagogy. As I have argued, intercultural praxis can generate a “critical decolonial consciousness” that unsettles classroom hierarchies and canonical histories through an improvisational ethics grounded in the collective listening imagination.

But the real work of decolonization ultimately emerges through embodied musical performance. As I have shown, the rehearsal room serves as a maroon community, a liminal site of collaborative study where the messiness of intercultural contact is negotiated through real-time exchange. The physical proximity of our bodies created an intimate space of decolonial thinking and doing. Our final performance extended this improvisatory process. Through an intercorporeal praxis grounded in dialogic listening, we remapped the very idea of “world music,” linking musical geographies from Tehran to Mindanao, Native America to Black America. This new global landscape wasn’t about multicultural homogeneity. Rather, we sought an intersubjective feeling of “togetherness-in-difference” through shared sound. This decolonial “loving-from-below,” as Carolyn Ureña might describe it, is enacted “between those rendered other by hegemonic forces” and promotes “loving as an active, intersubjective process” in order to “articulate an anti-hegemonic, anti-imperialist affect and attitude” (2017: 86).

What might all of this say about the politics of community building in the post-9/11 era? The AIR cohort has a lot to say about that. As Francis Wong's reflection on the first ImprovisAsians! Festival suggests, AIR's survival rests on the reality that "Asian America" is simply not enough. Avoiding the pitfalls of narrow ethnic frameworks, they build on the unfinished work of the TWLF by cultivating insurgent narratives that adjoin disparate oppressions and rebellions in a shared totality of radical agency. In doing so, AIR creates an ethical community geared toward the broader project of liberation, a "sound come-unity." This "sound come-unity" is not foolproof. It relies on some of the gendered erasures that preclude such utopian liberation. But it does reveal one potential model for imagining a radical new world, something that all of the artists in my dissertation have pursued in their own way. Perhaps it is a matter of simply willing ourselves to hear it. As Modirzadeh said to me, "we want to feel together. There's a desire. So, we are going to make ourselves hear it."

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Toward a Listening Repertoire

I'll never forget one of the first conversations I had with Hafez Modirzadeh. He was performing with a quartet of local free jazz musicians, some of whom I knew from my experience in experimental music circles. They were playing in this teepee-like structure in a corporate backlot in downtown Los Angeles. Set up in an open-semi circle, the pick-up group played an hour and a half straight of improvised music to a handful of captivated listeners. After the gig, Modirzadeh and I sat on cheap plastic folding chairs and discussed my research. Listening eagerly from the edge of his seat, Modirzadeh pushed back against my focus on racial and ethnic identity. "I'd rather think about Dhiren's music or Hafez's music," he said. He talked about constellations, shifting networks of individual musicians emerging in the listener's imagination. Modirzadeh ran out to his car and came back with a small piece of tattered paper. On the back of what looked like an old grocery list was a handwritten cluster of musical notes; half flatted Es and As strung together in a kind of chromodal periodic table. He didn't really explain what it meant. I'm not sure if I totally understood either but I still carry the crumpled paper in my wallet.¹²²

I've often struggled to define the work of these diverse musicians in ways that avoid reductive tropes and essentialist categories. "South Asian," "Arab," "Middle Eastern;" these classifications have always been flawed. They attempt to encapsulate

¹²² Hafez Modirzadeh, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, July 6, 2016.

broad swaths of people across vast and often incommensurable difference. Some of the artists I've explored have actively embraced these terms to differentiate themselves, to position themselves in relation to Others like them, or to claim an identity stolen away. ElSaffar's search for Iraqiness is one such agentic move. But these rubrics have also been deployed by fans and critics to distinguish Brown improvisors from normative jazz bodies, to box them in or exclude them from the art form's racialized pantheon. Many have pushed back. Vijay Iyer is perhaps the most virulent in his opposition to ethnic categorization. As an Indian American in jazz," he writes, "I will say that generally people who don't fit into a narrative are not seen as connected as part of the same community and process. Instead, ethnicity becomes a way to imagine and reinforce separateness" (2016). I believe that Modirzadeh's focus on musical constellations, however mystical, is a similar political gesture; a way to unsettle Western identity categories and articulate the powerfully personal nature of improvised practice.

"Brown" is an equally contested category. Its amorphous signification can easily elide the differences that make these artists so unique. During initial conference presentations, I was often met with confusion and even hostility over my use of the term. Some couldn't get past the label's seemingly insular racial connotation, "Brown," as if it were a monolith of the skin. Others called me out for the term's problematic conflation of race, ethnicity, and religion. They were usually white people. But the flawed marker suggests something different from those whose experience of post-9/11 racialization necessitates new and more conscious forms of identification and affiliation. But as I have argued, post-9/11 Brown jazz is more than an identity or metonym for musical

collaboration. It goes deeper than learning how to play together. Rather, it serves as a social vision and political strategy to negotiate the spatial, temporal, and cartographic ruptures of 9/11 through the fugitive break that constitutes blackness. And yet, like “South Asian” and “Middle Eastern,” the label doesn’t mean the same thing always and everywhere. The four case studies I’ve charted speak to the conditional im/possibilities of Brown in post-9/11 America.

Vijay Iyer’s story was the first one that I knew I was going to tell. As my “Brown hero,” he paved the way for people like me to play and talk about jazz from critical South Asian American perspectives. Like ElSaffar and Modirzadeh, Iyer’s turn to Indian classical music occurred later in life, as a way to reconcile his tenuous position as a Brown jazz musician working in an African American idiom. His embrace of black music and politics is perhaps the most pronounced out of all the artists, reflecting both his early relationship to AIR and nuanced awareness of the structural position of blackness. Iyer is also the most visible artist in this project. While often pigeonholed by critics, his work has penetrated both the mainstream jazz scene and the elite cultural institutions that financially sustain his successful career. Gopal’s story was the last that I told; discovered almost by accident through the improvised nature of creative labor and ethnographic fieldwork. Unlike Iyer, Gopal’s immersion in South Indian music from a young age generated an unparalleled grounding in tradition. It also exposed her to the gender and caste politics of Karnatik music in ways that Iyer could avoid through his identity as a “modern,” male jazz performer. Gopal attempted to bridge her conflicting worlds through a multivocal process of musical translation. But her identity as a South Asian American

female vocalist was too much to bear, rendering her inaudible within a commercial jazz scene defined by heteronormative masculinities and violent sonic omissions. Despite niche popularity amongst global jazz listeners, her marginal success and visibility in the industry speak to the ongoing raced and gendered construction of jazz spaces. Iyer and Gopal's stories thus represent lateral pathways into the politics of post-9/11 Brown; inverse relations to India and black America marked by precarity and hope.

Despite their differences, Iyer and Gopal are intimately linked through personal and collaborative networks. Iyer has been an important mentor to the younger Gopal through his position at Harvard University, where he has made space for female and queer artist-scholars of color. Gopal still calls him "Professor Iyer" in academic contexts, out of what she described to me as Indian respect for elders and a slight unease around his critical acumen.¹²³ But Iyer and Gopal's relationship exceeds conventional teacher/student hierarchies. They collaborate in more contexts than I could possibly chart here. Their musical affinities might even reflect familial ties. According to Gopal, the two could be distant cousins, their Tamil Brahmin roots revealing a deeper shared heritage elided in their distinct cultural experiences. More importantly, Iyer and Gopal are committed to community building on and off stage. Iyer's work with Thums Up, among many others, highlights his efforts to build critical Brown collectivities that speak to issues of post-9/11 surveillance and state-terror within contested white space. Meanwhile, Gopal's involvement in the "We Have Voice Collective" reveals her investment in creating female and queer of color spaces so critical in the gendered jazz world. Unlike

¹²³ Priya Gopal, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, July 6, 2017.

ElSaffar and Modirzadeh, Iyer and Gopal's work as South Asian American creative artists suggests a deeper commitment to the politics of post-9/11 Brown.

Hafez Modirzadeh and Amir ElSaffar's stories provide a more complex picture of post-9/11 Brown formation. Like Iyer and Gopal, their ties are deeply relational and generational. As the eldest musician, Modirzadeh mentored both Iyer and ElSaffar, inspiring the budding trumpeter in his intercultural exploration of Iraqi music. As friends and fellow musicians, they have forged a distinct creative space for Middle Eastern American improvisers marginalized in the broader jazz scene. But like Iyer, both ElSaffar and Modirzadeh have expanded insular ethno-racial frameworks through a deep engagement with African American artists and histories. ElSaffar's early sonic encounters with blackness reveal modes of Afro-Arab affiliation that allowed him to negotiate his difference as a multi-ethnic Iraqi American. Modirzadeh's connection to black music is similarly strategic. His chromodal system was directly inspired by a genealogy of black radical artist-theorists from Coltrane to Coleman. And Modirzadeh's central role in AIR, while often inaudible within East Asian frameworks, points to his deep commitment to building Afro Asian sounds and spaces.

Modirzadeh and ElSaffar's distinct experiences also diverge in critical ways. Unlike Iyer and Gopal, their multi-ethnic Middle Eastern American upbringings place them in closer proximity to whiteness. They were both raised by white mothers and "ethnic" fathers, an interracial union that generated a more pronounced feeling of un/belonging. I can certainly relate to this liminal space. And that's probably why I feel much more of an affinity with them than I do to Iyer and Gopal despite our shared ethnic

identities. Like my inquiry into Indian music after 9/11, Modirzadeh and ElSaffar's creative exploration of Iraqi and Iranian classical music suggests a more pronounced desire for heritage amongst multi-ethnic communities. This ancestral turn often fell into the murky territories of universalism. ElSaffar's search for maqam and Modirzadeh's mystical quest for "Makam X" reveals the pitfalls of universalist discourse lurking in the shadows of intercultural performance. At the same time, these creative explorations were deeply political. Modirzadeh's chromodal inquiry served as a decolonial theory of practice that unsettled Western epistemologies, providing a tangible model for intercultural music making across disciplinary boundaries. But unlike Iyer, Modirzadeh has operated from the periphery of the establishment, given his lukewarm reception in both academia and the broader jazz and creative music scene. A decade later, ElSaffar's excavation of Iraqi cultural heritage served as a direct response to the crisis in Arab American identity and political life post-9/11. In short, Modirzadeh and ElSaffar's work reveals the historical contingencies of Brown as a contested racial formation.

The notion of voice is a critical undercurrent throughout this project. I didn't anticipate writing about voice(s). In some ways, my initial focus on instrumentalists blinded me to issues of voice and vocality. On a fundamental level, all of these artists have powerful sonic voices with a unique intercultural language that reflects their in-between experience as musicians of color. As Brown artist-scholars, they speak not only through their instruments but via the discourse around the music. Iyer, Modirzadeh, and Gopal have actively embraced this role, as we can hear through their pedagogical work, scholarly commitments, and investment in my critical take of their music. Through this

process, I've also developed my own voice. I have learned to articulate and deploy my musical and narrative voice in ways that have helped me better understand my personal experience of race and racialization as an artist-scholar of color. In doing so, I reveal a complex web of voices—often dissonant and sometimes inaudible—that speaks to the limits and hopes of post-9/11 Brown auralty.

My critical understanding of voice emerged through Gopal's unique story. As I have argued, brownvoice emerges as a mediating sonic force that shapes the way we see and hear South Asian voices in various performative spaces. This raced and gendered conception of voice has influenced the way Gopal's embodied voice is heard and imagined. It also has had tangible effects on Gopal's voice, isolating it from the social context of improvisation and limiting her ability to access its myriad colors and tones. In contrast, Amir Elsaaffar has had much more control over the way his voice moves and sounds. Through his identity as a male instrumentalist, Elsaaffar could more fluidly translate the microtonal nuances and embodied cultural memory of Iraqi maqam within the language of jazz improvisation. Similarly, John-Carlos Perea's conscious choice to use a more nasal vocal timbre during the ImprovisAsians! Festival speaks to the highly gendered nature of voice and vocal agency in intercultural jazz. But the process of *sonic auto-mimicry* would have much more traumatic implications for Gopal. As I have argued, this partial imitation of imagined self renders the South Asian voice the site of symbolic gendered racial violence. In writing about this experience, I often elided Gopal's physical voice with the critical concept of voice. In some cases, this slippage unintentionally minimized the personal trauma Gopal experienced by reducing her embodied voice to an

analytic object for reading oppression. But as I have suggested, *sonic auto-mimicry* operates in this tenuous space between performance and representation. A broader analysis of diverse Brown singers might reveal a more complex picture of voice in its entangled physical, embodied, and critical manifestations.

My attraction to these diverse voices was initially centered on their music, its innovative and imaginative beauty. I was interested in the power of intercultural sound to contest the dominant ways Brown people have been imagined, as if the “music itself” was responsible for such a seismic cultural shift. No doubt, I’ve gotten to know these artists’ unique sounds, their fluid shapes and musical intricacies. I now hear them in different and deeper ways. I hear Gopal’s crossings of Karnatik and abhang sound worlds as representative of her perilous journey across gender and geography. In ElSaffar, I hear a deeper grounding in the specificities of Iraqi *maqam* and the black improvisational sensibilities that temper his universal search. I’ve been tracking Iyer’s music for over a decade now and he continues to resist any category placed on his work. I’ve perhaps gotten to know Modirzadeh’s music the deepest of all. Our experiences performing together were some of the most memorable and just plain fun. In some ways, my brief time with him brought me back to the impetus of this project; the sheer joy of improvised play. These encounters weren’t any more special than others, but they do reflect another kind of intimacy foreclosed in the ethnographic gaze.

But in retrospect, my experience as an improviser blinded me to issues of musical reception; how these diverse sounds are seen and heard, constructed and contested by active listeners. This project has become much more about listening than I had

anticipated. My attention to the politics of listening revealed troubling histories of orientalist hearing. As Deborah Wong has written, “the risk of reinscription, appropriation, or orientalist misreading is ever present in Asian American performance; the possibility of empowerment stands side by side with the susceptible audience that consumes with the greedy expectation of orientalist pleasure and is inevitably gratified” (2004: 7). This greedy desire for the Other was audible in the many performative spaces I traversed. It was probably most apparent in large music festivals; Iyer’s un/heard black incursions amongst Ojai’s radical chic; ElSaffar’s inaudible imperial critique at Newport. Their muffled voices suggest the limits of intercultural performance within the festival context where stark performer/audience divisions and histories of exotic spectatorship undermine the oppositional politics these musicians seek. Future research might examine the politics of listening in European jazz festivals, for instance, where many of these artists have found a more popular and perhaps equally troubling musical reception.

Musicians like Iyer and ElSaffar, however, have been able to avert these listening tropes through their identities as male instrumentalists. Despite experiencing Otherness, their normative look fuels an ongoing desire for gendered virtuosity amongst mainstream jazz listeners. Iyer has perhaps profited off this dichotomy the most, becoming the most visible South Asian American jazz musician in the world. ElSaffar’s recent success suggests a similar trend. His large ensemble, Rivers of Sound, has met critical praise and now performs in concert venues across the US, Europe, and the Middle East—a growing market where jazz embodies the ideals of racial democracy and Western modernity. ElSaffar described this newfound recognition as an indicator of his music’s universal

significance.¹²⁴ I'm suspect. I would argue that Iyer and ElSaffar's success says something more about a peculiar post-9/11 fetishization of Brown "jazzmasculinities," Nichole Rustin-Pachal's shorthand for the values of "authority, creativity, truth-telling, self-determination, and authenticity" embodied by innovative "jazzmen" (2017: 4). This newfound desire for the Brown male jazzman speaks to similar tropes of authority and authenticity tempered by long-standing histories of orientalism. It also reflects the jazz world's inheritance of a gendered legacy, that while disrupting the black/white racial binary raises critical questions of community formation, musical transmission, and the ethics of listening.

Jazz communities are messy, cut across by power and difference, distinction and incorporation. As Sherrie Tucker has written, jazz communities are tenuous sites forged through "affinity, practice, and labor," as well as inclusion and exclusion. "Community belonging, like national belonging," Tucker writes, "is defined both by who is in and who is out, designated by lines that are sometimes fuzzy, sometimes deadly sharp, and usually contested" (2008: 249). All of the musicians in my project occupy an African American creative space broadly identified as "jazz," as much as they might resist such narrow genre categories. Who's in and who's out of this new Brown jazz community? What racial and gendered narratives are transmitted or contested? How does listening offer a more inclusive space of encounter?

In beginning to answer these questions, I return to Diana Taylor's notion of the "repertoire," which I discussed in reference to Amir ElSaffar's oral transmission of

¹²⁴ Amir ElSaffar, personal interview with Dhiren Panikker, July 7, 2018.

maqam in chapter four. For Taylor, the repertoire is about ritualized and embodied transmission, the transaction of cultural codes, values, and memories through the live event. This is not unlike improvisation, where the co-presence of bodies creates an active space for the transference of individual and collective memories, histories, and values across groups and generations. As George Lewis reminds us, “Jazz in its various forms possesses the property of serving as a medium of real-time sonic translation of cultural values” (2016: xxii). This is particularly the case in the intercultural spaces I’ve charted, where multiple musical histories are negotiated, translated, and ultimately transmitted through the intercorporeal encounter between active performers and audiences.

The transmission of raced and gendered histories is powerfully active throughout all of my case studies. In one sense, Iyer, Gopal, ElSaffar, and Modirzadeh have all expanded the jazz “repertoire” through an intentional engagement with cultural heritages ignored in canonical histories. These intercultural “repertoires” are then passed down through the embodied “repertoire” of performance and mentorship, both critical forms of oral transmission in jazz. Thus, we can map a direct line of musical transmission, for instance: Modirzadeh → Iyer → ElSaffar. This line, as clumsy as it might be, highlights the production of a new repertoire of bodies and sounds excluded from the racial lineage of jazz. Emergent Brown artists including Aakash Mittal and myself extend this intercultural repertoire in ways that transform both the look and sound of jazz in a post-9/11 world. But this new multi-ethnic repertoire belies its deeply gendered formulation. ElSaffar’s translational and transnational performance of Iraqi *maqam* thus serves as a transaction of a gendered vocal lineage marred by war and displacement. In salvaging

these lost histories, he reasserts their cultural value and meaning in a new sonic landscape, one equally marked by gendered omission. In fact, all of the musicians in my dissertation have absorbed and transmitted gendered repertoires of inheritance from a genealogy of black male performance. While expanding the jazz “repertoire,” Modirzadeh’s black techno-scientific explorations are passed down quite literally in the classroom, a gendered history absorbed by another generation of creative, albeit mostly male jazz artists. Iyer is aware of this troubling pattern and has tried to curtail its ongoing current by cultivating alternative spaces of knowledge production for female artist-scholars of color. His work with Gopal provides one model for disrupting the razor-sharp boundaries of the jazz community Tucker describes. But as we have seen, the repertoire of the commercial jazz industry, the primary face of the art form for the mainstream public, has led to some of the most troubled erasures, ones that I’d rather not repeat again in fears of transmitting their violent raced and gendered codes in more archival form. How might we cultivate a more ethical listening repertoire?

Improvisation can model an ethical listening repertoire through its reliance on dialogic exchange based in shared co-presence. Several moments come to mind: Waits’ listening embrace of Zarour at Hyde Park; Iyer and Smith’s hearing and holding in Ojai’s perilous sonic space. These were intimate duo encounters, the one’s Smith described as two partners moving together. But they also represent deeply gendered transmissions as well, and our spectacularized looking rendered them more vivid in the jazz archive. The most profound listening memories I experienced were the moments of collective singing: our quiet humming of “Naima” behind closed doors; our collective drone against

Robert's urgent speech-song; our communal sounding of Brown belonging at BRM. It was this last space where I felt the most at peace, where the boundaries of difference were both amplified and bridged, and where the movement of bodies and voices made audible another listening repertoire. When my camera phone died, I entered the fold, not the ethnographic "field," but the shared sonic field we've all known and felt but are perhaps too afraid to write about for fear of losing our shadowed presence, for becoming too much a part of the scene we so carefully construct and transmit through the ethnographic archive. It was in this moment, however, where my singular presence—the one marked by both appearance/disappearance as a young Brown kid in New England those many years ago—joined a different "repertoire" of belonging.

Perhaps if we begin to listen from this tenuous space might we begin—as scholars, musicians, friends, seekers—to rediscover a shared "repertoire" that binds us all in our many differences, not an imagined unity, but a "sound come-unity." This capacity for collective listening is something we all share, not just those chosen few Brown heroes on stage. But it isn't about recovering a shared past. It is a foreshadowing, a lingering in-sound, a movement in relation, a radical listening relation just up ahead. As Vijay Iyer reminds us, our work is "far from over."

Appendix I

Selected Discography

- Abassi, Rez. *Bazaar*. MP3. Zoho, 2006.
- . *Snake Charmer*. MP3. Earth Sounds, 2005.
- . *Unfiltered Universe*. MP3. Whirlwind, 2017.
- Aditya Prakash Ensemble. *Mara*. MP3. AKPMUSIC, 2016.
- Gopal, Priya. *Aikyam: Onnu*. MP3. Self-Published, 2018.
- ElSaffar, Amir. *Alchemy*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2013.
- . *Crisis*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2015.
- . *Inana*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2011.
- . *Not Two*. MP3. New Amsterdam, 2017.
- . *Two Rivers*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2007.
- ElSaffar, Amir, and Hafez Modirzadeh. *Radif Suite*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2010.
- Iyer, Vijay. *Architextures*. MP3. Asian Improv Records; Giant, 1998.
- . *Blood Sutra*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2003.
- . *Break Stuff*. MP3. ACT, 2015.
- . *Far From Over*. MP3. ECM, 2017.
- . *Historicity*. MP3. ACT, 2000.
- . *Memorophilia*. MP3. Asian Improv Records, 1995.
- . *Panoptic Modes*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2010.
- . *Tragicomic*. MP3. Sunnyside, 2008.

Iyer, Vijay, and Mike Ladd. *Holding It Down: The Veterans' Dreams Project*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2013.

———. *In What Language*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2003.

———. *Still Life with Commentator*. MP3. Sunnyside, 2007.

Iyer, Vijay, and Rudresh Mahanthappa. *Raw Materials*. MP3. Savoy, 2006.

Iyer, Vijay, Prasanna, and Nitin Mitta. *Tirtha*. MP3. ACT, 2008.

Iyer, Vijay, and Wadada Leo Smith. *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke*. MP3. ECM, 2016.

Mahanthappa, Rudresh. *Gamak*. MP3. ACT, 2013.

———. *Mother Tongue*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2004.

———. *Samdhi*. MP3. ACT, 2011.

Mahanthappa, Rudresh, and Kadri Gopalnath. *Kinsmen*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2008.

Mahanthappa, Rudresh, and Bunky Green. *Dual Identity*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2010.

Mahanthappa, Rudresh, and Indo-Pak Coalition. *Apti*. MP3. Innova, 2008.

Modirzadeh, Hafez. *Bemsha Allegria*. MP3. Self-Published, 2007.

———. *In Chromodal Discourse*. MP3. Asian Improv Records, 1993.

———. *In Convergence Liberation*. MP3. Pi Recordings, 2014.

———. *Nave-Ye Mardom: The Peoples Blues*. MP3. Self-Published, 1996.

———. *Post-Chromodal Out!* MP3. Pi Recordings, 2012.

Swaminathan, Rajna. *Of Agency and Abstraction*. MP3. Biophilia, 2019.

Works Cited

- Aarim-Heriot, Najia, and Roger Daniels. 2003. *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Abdulrahim, Sawson. 2008. "Whiteness and the Arab Immigrant Experience." In *Race and Arab Americans Before and After September 11*, edited by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, 131–46. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- "About." 2017. Hyde Park Jazz Festival. 2017. <http://hydeparkjazzfestival.org>.
- "About." ———. 2018. Brooklyn Raga Massive. 2018. <https://www.brooklynragamassive.org>.
- "About." ———. 2019. New Amsterdam Records. 2019. <https://www.newamrecords.com/about-1>.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. "Writing Against Culture." In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, edited by Richard Gabriel Fox, 137–54. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Alimahomed, Sabrina. 2011. "'Generation Islam': Arab American Muslims and Racial Politics after September 11." *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 4 (3): 381–97.
- Alsultany, Evelyn. 2012. *The Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*. New York: NYU Press.
- Anderson, Leon. 2006. "Analytic Autoethnography." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (4): 373–95.
- Ang, Ian. 2003. "Togetherness-in-Difference: Beyond Diaspora, into Hybridity." *Asian Studies Review* 27 (2): 141–54.
- Asai, Susan Miyo. 2005. "Cultural Politics: The African American Connection in Asian American Jazz-Based Music." *Asian Music* 36 (1): 87–108.
- Atkins, E. Taylor. 2001. *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press.
- , ed. 2003. *Jazz Planet*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Badiou, Alain. 2011. *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass: Polity.

- Bald, Vivek. 2013. *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Baraka, Amiri. 1967. *Black Music*. New York: W. Morrow.
- Barreto, Almir Cortes, and Hafez Modirzadeh. 2015. "A Discourse on Brazilian Popular Music and U.S. Jazz Education." *IASPM@Journal* 5 (1): 23–35.
- Barrett, Lindon. 1999. *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*. Cambridge University Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Fontana Press.
- Barz, Gregory F., and Timothy J. Cooley, eds. 2008. *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Berger, Harris M. 1999. *Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Berliner, Paul. 1994. *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1984. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28: 125–33.
- Bharucha, Rustom. 1996. "Somebody's Other: Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of Our Times." In *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, edited by Pavis, Patrice. London: Routledge.
- Biers, Katherine. 2006. "Syncope Fever: James Weldon Johnson and the Black Phonographic Voice." *Representations* 96 (1): 99–125.
- Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. 2016. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. New York: Routledge.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2004. "From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial: Towards a New System of Racial Stratification in the USA." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27 (6): 931–50.
- Borgo, David. 2007. "Free Jazz in the Classroom: An Ecological Approach to Music Education." *Jazz Perspectives* 1 (1): 61–88.
- Born, Georgina, and David Hesmondhalgh, eds. 2000. *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Braggs, Rashida K. 2016. *Jazz Diasporas: Race, Music, and Migration in Post-World War II Paris*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Brinner, Benjamin. 2009. *Playing Across a Divide: Israeli-Palestinian Musical Encounters*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bruker, Malia. 2011. "Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms (Book Review)." *Journal of Film and Video* 63 (4): 66–69.
- Cadogan, Garnette. 2016. "Walking While Black." *Literary Hub*. July 8, 2016. <https://lithub.com/walking-while-black/>.
- Cainkar, Louise. 2006. "Immigrants from the Arab World." In *The New Chicago: A Social and Cultural Analysis*, edited by John P. Koval, Larry Bennett, Michael I. J. Bennett, Fassil Demissie, Roberta Garner, and Kiljoong Kim. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- . 2008. "Thinking Outside the Box: Arabs and Race in the United States." In *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, edited by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, 46–80. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Chang, Edward T., and Russell Charles Leong, eds. 2017. *Los Angeles--Struggles toward Multiethnic Community: Asian American, African American, and Latino Perspectives*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Chávez, Luis, and Russell Skelchy. 2016. "Decolonizable Spaces in Ethnomusicology." *Blog. Ethnomusicology Review (blog)*. November 10, 2016. <http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/ decolonizable-spaces-ethnomusicology>.
- Clements, Carl. 2005. "Musical Interchange Between Indian Music and Hip Hop." In *Critical Minded: New Approaches to Hip Hop Studies*, edited by Ellie M. Hisama and Evan Rapport. I.S.A.M. Monographs, no. 35. Brooklyn, NY: Institute for Studies in American Music.
- "Code of Conduct." 2018. *We Have Voice*. 2018. <https://too-many.org>.
- Currie, Scott. 2016. "The Other Side of Here and Now: Cross-Cultural Reflections on the Politics of Improvisation Studies." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 11 (1–2): 1–10.
- Cvek, Sven. 2011. *Towering Figures: Reading the 9/11 Archive*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

- Daughtery, Martin. 2012. "Afterword: From Voice to Violence and Back Again." In *Music, Politics, and Violence*, edited by Kip Pegley and Susan Fast, 243–64. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- . 2017. "Acoustic Palimpsests." In *Theorizing Sound Writing*, edited by Deborah Kapchan. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Davé, Shilpa S. 2013. *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- De, Aparajita. 2016. *South Asian Racialization and Belonging after 9/11: Masks of Threat*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- De Lissovoy, Noah. 2010. "Decolonial Pedagogy and the Ethics of the Global." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31 (3): 279–93.
- Denzin, Norman K. 2006. "Pedagogy, Performance, and Autoethnography." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26 (4): 333–38.
- . 2013. *Interpretive Autoethnography*. Vol. 2. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: Sage.
- . 2017. "A Manifesto for Performance Autoethnography." *International Review of Qualitative Research* 10 (1): 44–45.
- Dessen, Michael. 2004. "Improvising in a Different Clave: Steve Coleman and AfroCuba de Matanzas." In *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, edited by Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin, 1st ed. *Music/Culture*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press.
- . 2006. "Asian Americans and Creative Music Legacies." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 1 (3). <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/56>.
- Gopal, Priya. 2011. *Rasam for the Dancer's Soul*. Broward College: Unpublished.
- . 2016. "Ankhrasmation: The Praxis of Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith." Masters Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Doyle, Peter. 2005. *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900-1960*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- DuBois, W. E. B. 1919. "Opinion." *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, 1919.

- Eidsheim, Nina Sun. 2008. "Voice as a Technology of Selfhood: Towards an Analysis of Racialized Timbre and Vocal Performance." Dissertation, University of California, San Diego.
- Elia, Nada, Jodi Kim, Shana L Redmond, Dylan Rodriguez, Sarita Echavez See, and David Hernández, eds. 2016. *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ellis, Carolyn. 1999. "Heartful Autoethnography." *Qualitative Health Research* 9 (5): 669–83.
- Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2010. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12 (1).
- Ellis, Carolyn, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2000. "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, 2nd ed., 733–68. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- . 2006. "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography: An Autopsy." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (4): 429–49.
- Erlmann, Veit. 1993. "Call and Response: A Reply to Mark Slobin." *Ethnomusicology* 37 (2): 263–67.
- . 1999. *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ettorre, Elizabeth. 2016. *Autoethnography as Feminist Method: Sensitising the Feminist "I."* New York: Routledge.
- Feld, Steven. 1987. "Dialogic Editing: Interpreting How Kaluli Read Sound and Sentiment." *Cultural Anthropology* 2 (2): 190–210.
- . 2000. "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music." *Public Culture* 12 (1): 145–71.
- . 2012a. *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: A Memoir of Five Musical Years in Ghana*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2012b. *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*. 3rd ed. Durham [N.C.] and London: Duke University Press.
- Feld, Steven, and Aaron Fox. 1999. "Music." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9 (1/2): 159–62.

- Feldman, Keith P. 2011. "Towards an Afro-Arab Diasporic Culture: The Translational Practices of David Graham Du Bois." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 31: 152–72.
- . 2017. *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fife, Wayne. 2005. *Doing Fieldwork: Ethnographic Methods for Research in Developing Countries and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fischlin, Daniel, and Ajay Heble, eds. 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press.
- Fischlin, Daniel, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz. 2013. *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Co-Creation*. Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fischlin, Daniel, and Eric Porter. 2016. "Improvisation and Global Sites of Difference: Ten Parables Verging on a Theory." Edited by Daniel Fischlin and Eric Porter. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 11 (1–2): 1–19.
- Floyd Jr., Samuel A. 1996. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Floyd Jr., Samuel A., Melanie Zeck, and Guthrie P. Ramsey. 2017. *The Transformation of Black Music: The Rhythms, the Songs, and the Ships of the African Diaspora*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fusco, Coco. 1994. "The Other History of Intercultural Performance." *TDR* (1988) 38 (1): 143–67.
- Garellick, Jon. 2013. "Diversity Instrumental to Newport Jazz Festival." *Boston Globe*, August 5, 2013. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/music/2013/08/04/music-review-newport-jazz-festival/ZOLkoZptX7R49yP0pk0gcL/story.html>.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Giroux, Henry A. 2013. *On Critical Pedagogy*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Gordon, Lewis. 2013. *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*. New York: Routledge.

- Govind, Arathi. 2012. "It's Not Fusion: Hybridity in the Music of Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa." *Masters*, University of North Texas.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. 2004. "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality." In *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, 102–25. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gualtieri, Sarah M.A. 2009. *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian Diaspora*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. 1997. *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gusterson, Hugh. 1997. "Studying Up Revisited." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 20 (1): 114–19.
- Halaby, Samia. 2016. *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*. Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2013. "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons." In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, 2–13. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Harrison, Anthony Kwame. 2014. "'What Happens in the Cabin . . .': An Arts-Based Autoethnography of Underground Hip Hop Song Making." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 8 (1): 1–27.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hassan, Scheherazade Qassim. 2001. "Republic of Iraq." *Grove Music Online*. 2001. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000013899>.
- Heble, Ajay. 2000. *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Heble, Ajay, and Mark Laver. 2016. *Improvisation and Music Education: Beyond the Classroom*. New York: Routledge.
- Heble, Ajay, and Rob Wallace. 2013. *People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz Is Now!* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Heble, Ajay, and Ellen Waterman. 2008. "Sounds of Hope, Sounds of Change: Improvisation, Pedagogy, Social Justice." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 3 (2): 1–4.
- Hershberg, Eric, and Kevin W Moore. 2002. *Critical Views of September 11: Analyses from Around the World*. New York: New Press.
- Hisama, Ellie M. 2005. "'We're All Asian Really': Hip Hop's Afro-Asian Crossings." In *Critical Minded: New Approaches to Hip Hop Studies*, edited by Ellie M. Hisama and Evan Rapport. I.S.A.M. Monographs, no. 35. Brooklyn, NY: Institute for Studies in American Music.
- Ho, Fred Wei-han, and Bill Mullen, eds. 2008. *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Imoud, Sara. 2015. "Roundtable on Anti-Blackness and Black-Palestinian Solidarity." Blog. Nouraerakat (blog). June 22, 2015. <http://www.nouraerakat.com/blog/roundtable-on-anti-blackness-and-black-palestinian-solidarity>.
- "Iranian Americans: Immigration and Assimilation." 2014. Washington, DC: Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans. <https://paaia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/iranian-americans-immigration-and-assimilation.pdf>.
- Iyer, Deepa. 2015. *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future*. New York and London: The New Press.
- . 2017. *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future*. New York: The New Press.
- Iyer, Vijay. 2002. "Embodied Mind, Situated Cognition, and Expressive Microtiming in African-American Music." *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 19 (3): 387–414.
- . 2014. "Theorizing Improvisation: Syllabus." Facebook. Facebook. October 1, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/vijay-iyer/theorizing-improvisation-syllabus/10152437438968111/>.
- . 2015. "Insidious Embrace: Performing While Brown in 2015." Conference Paper presented at the Yale Asian American Studies Conference, Yale University.
- . 2016. "Vijay Iyer on Musical and Ethnic Identity." Spin. November 4, 2016. <https://www.spin.com/featured/vijay-iyer-on-musical-and-ethnic-identity/>.

- . 2018. “Vijay Iyer: A Moral Imperative to Speak for the Musical Margins: On Finding an Uneasy Peace with Jazz Traditionalists.” *Literary Hub*. August 16, 2018. <https://lithub.com/vijay-iyer-a-moral-imperative-to-speak-for-the-musical-margins/>.
- Jackson, Alecia Y., and Lisa A. Mazzei. 2008. “Experience and ‘I’ in Autoethnography: A Deconstruction.” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 1 (3): 299–318.
- Jackson, Travis A. 2012. *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
- Jamal, Amaney A. 2008. *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*. Syracuse University Press.
- Johnson, Gaye Theresa. 2013. *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jun, Helen Heran. 2011. *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America*. New York and London: NYU Press.
- Kajikawa, Loren. 2012. “The Sound of Struggle: Black Revolutionary Nationalism and Asian American Jazz.” In *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, edited by David Andrew Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark. Roth Family Foundation Music in America Imprint. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kalmanovitch, Tanya. 2005. “Jazz and Karnatic Music: Intercultural Collaboration in Pedagogical Perspective.” *The World of Music* 47 (3): 135–60.
- Kapadia, Ronak K. 2016. “Up in the Air and on the Skin: Drone Warfare and the Queer Calculus of Pain.” In *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*, edited by Nada Elia, David M Hernandez, Jodi Kim, Shana L Redmond, Dylan Rodriguez, and Sarita Echavez See, 360–75. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Kapchan, Deborah. 2017. *Theorizing Sound Writing*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. 2012. *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Keyes, Cheryl Lynette. 2002. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness. Music in American Life*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Kheshti, Roshanak. 2015. *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music. Postmillennial Pop*. New York: New York University Press.

- Kim, Claire Jean. 1999. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics Society* 27 (105): 105–38.
- Knowles, Ric. 2010. *Theatre and Interculturalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kun, Josh, and Laura Pulido, eds. 2013. *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leonard, Karen. 2010. *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lewis, George E. 2004. "Gittin' to Know Y'all : Improvised Music, Interculturalism and the Racial Imagination." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 1 (1). <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/6>.
- . 2007. "Improvisation and Pedagogy: Background and Focus of Inquiry." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 3 (2).
- . 2014. "Collaborative Improvisation as Critical Pedagogy." *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2014 (34): 40–47.
- Lewis, George E., and Benjamin Piekut. 2016a. *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*. Vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2016b. *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*. Vol. 2. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lipsitz, George. 1994. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place*. London: Verso.
- . 2007. "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape." *Landscape Journal* 26 (1): 10–23.
- Locke, Graham. 1999. *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Lubin, Alex. 2014. *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. 1993. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Maghbouleh, Neda. 2017. *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

- Maira, Sunaina. 2008. "'We Ain't Missing': Palestinian Hip Hop—A Transnational Youth Movement." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8 (2): 161–92.
- . 2013. *Jil Oslo: Palestinian Hip Hop, Youth Culture, and the Youth Movement*. Washington, DC: Tadween Publishing.
- . 2016. *The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror*. New York: New York University Press.
- Marcus, George E., and Michael M. J. Fischer. 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Márquez, John D. 2013. *Black-Brown Solidarity: Racial Politics in the New Gulf South*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- McClary, Susan, and Robert Walser. 1994. "Theorizing the Body in African-American Music." *Black Music Research Journal* 14 (1): 75–84.
- Meintjes, Louise. 1990. "Paul Simon's Graceland, South Africa, and the Mediation of Musical Meaning." *Ethnomusicology* 34 (1): 37–73.
- Middleton, Jason, and Roger Beebe. 2002. "The Racial Politics of Hybridity and 'Neo-Eclecticism' in Contemporary Popular Music." *Popular Music* 21 (2): 159–72.
- Modirzadeh, Hafez. 1986. "Model and Interpretation in Iranian Classical Music: The Performance Practice of Mahmoud Zoufonoun." Masters, University of California, Los Angeles.
- . 1992. "Chromodality and the Cross-Cultural Exchange of Musical Structure." Dissertation, Wesleyan University.
- . 1995. "Trans-Intervallic Exercise for the Post-Modern Improviser." Edited by Kevin Frey. *Horn Call* 25 (2): 55–57.
- . 2009. "Musical Compost, Consorts and Collapsing Pyramids: On the Disintegration of Traditional Performance Practices to Raise a Sound Society." *Leonardo* 42 (3): 252–58.
- . 2011. "On the Convergence Liberation of Makam X." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 7 (2): 1–21.
- Monson, Ingrid T. 1996. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- . 1998. “Oh Freedom: George Russell, John Coltrane, and Modal Jazz.” In *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, edited by Bruno Nettl and Melinda Russell, 149–68. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2007. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2004. “Knowledge of Freedom.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4 (2): 269–310.
- . 2008. “The Case of Blackness.” *Criticism* 50 (2): 177–218.
- . 2017. *Black and Blur*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Muller, Carol Ann, and Sathima Bea Benjamin. 2011. *Musical Echoes: South African Women Thinking in Jazz*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2000. “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s ‘The Sweetest Hangover (And Other STDs).’” *Theatre Journal* 52 (1): 67–79.
- Naber, Nadine. 2012. *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Nair, Ajay, and Murali Balaji, eds. 2008. *Desi Rap: Hip-Hop and South Asian America*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Narayan, Kirin. 1993. “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?” *American Anthropologist*, New Series 95 (3): 671–86.
- Nettl, Bruno. 1974. “Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach.” *The Musical Quarterly* 60 (1): 1–19.
- . 2015. *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-Three Discussions*. Third edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Nettl, Bruno, and Melinda Russell. 1998. *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Nicholson, Stuart. 2005. *Is Jazz Dead? (Or Has It Moved To A New Address?)* London: Routledge.

- Obadike, Mendi. 2005. "Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound." Dissertation, Duke University.
- Omar, Oumayma. 2018. "Baghdad's School of Music and Ballet Beats the Odds." *The Arab Weekly*, October 28, 2018. <https://thearabweekly.com/baghdads-school-music-and-ballet-beats-odds>.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 2014. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Oschinsky, Lawrence. 1947. "Islam in Chicago: Being a Study of the Acculturation of a Muslim-Palestinian Community in That City." Masters, Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. 1999. *Asian/American: Historical Crossing of a Racial Frontier*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Panikker, Dharendra. 2010. "Indian American Jazz: An Emerging Hybridity." Masters, University of California, Irvine.
- Pavis, Patrice, ed. 1996. *The Intercultural Performance Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Pegley, Kip, and Susan Fast. 2012. "'America: A Tribute to Heroes': Music, Mourning, and the Unified American Community." In *Music in the Post-9/11 World*, edited by Jonathan Ritter and Martin Daughtery, 27–42. New York and London: Routledge.
- Pellegrinelli, Lara. 2008. "Separated at 'Birth': Singing and the History of Jazz." In *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, 31–47. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Polk, Milbry, and Angela M. H. Schuster. 2005. *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Porter, Eric. 2002. *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- . 2008. "'Born Out of Jazz...Yet Embracing All Music': Race, Gender, and Technology in George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept." In *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Prashad, Vijay. 2000. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- . 2001. *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 2012. *Uncle Swami: South Asians in America Today*. New York: New Press.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1991. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, 33–40.
- . 2003. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Prouty, Kenneth E. 2008. "The 'Finite' Art of Improvisation: Pedagogy and Power in Jazz Education." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 4 (1): 1–15.
- Przybylski, Liz. 2018. "Bilingual Hip Hop from Community to Classroom and Back: A Study in Decolonial Applied Ethnomusicology." *Ethnomusicology* 62 (3): 375–402.
- Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Pulido, Laura. 2006. *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Southern California*. American Crossroads 19. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Radano, Ronald M. 1992. "Jazzin' the Classics: The AACM's Challenge to Mainstream Aesthetics." *Black Music Research Journal* 12 (1): 79–95.
- Rahaim, Matthew. 2012. *Musicking Bodies: Gesture and Voice in Hindustani Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Rana, Junaid. 2011. *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Raphael-Hernandez, Heike, and Shannon Steen. 2006. *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*. New York and London: NYU Press.
- Redmond, Shana L. 2016. "'As Though It Were Our Own': Against a Politics of Identification." In *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*, edited by Nada Elia, Kim Jodi, Shana L Redmond, Dylan Rodriguez, Sarita Echavez See, and David Hernández, 19–42. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Reed-Danahay, Deborah. 1997. *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Rice, Tim. 2008. "Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology." In *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in*

- Ethnomusicology, edited by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, Second, 42–61. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ritter, Jonathan, and Martin Daughtery. 2012. *Music in the Post-9/11 Era*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Roberts, Tamara. 2016. *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, Cedric J. 2005. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rodriguez, Alex. 2015. "Harmolodic Pedagogy and the Challenge of Omni-Musicality." *Jazz Perspectives* 9 (2): 173–92.
- Rustin, Nichole T., and Sherrie Tucker, eds. 2008. *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies. Refiguring American Music*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rustin-Paschal, Nichole. 2017. *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazzmasculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Samhan, Helen. 1999. "Not Quite White: Racial Classification and the Arab American Experience." In *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, edited by Michael Suleiman, 209–26. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Saunders, Patricia J. 2008. "Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman." *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 6 (1): 1–16.
- Schechner, Richard. 1982. "Intercultural Performance: 'An Introduction.'" *The Drama Review: TDR* 26 (2): 3–4.
- . 1990. "Magnitudes of Performance." In *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, edited by Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.
- Schechner, Richard, and Willa Appel, eds. 1990. *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.
- Scherbenske, Amanda L. 2014. "Multiplicity and Belonging Among New York City Improviser-Composers." Dissertation, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University.
- Sexton, Jared. 2010. "People-of-Color-Blindness Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery." *Social Text* 28 (2 103): 31–56.

- Sharma, Nitasha Tamar. 2010. *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness. Refiguring American Music*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2015. “Brown.” In *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, edited by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Vo, and K. Scott Wong, 18–20. New York and London: New York University Press.
- . 2016. “Rap, Race, Revolution: Post 9/11 Brown and a Hip Hop Critique of Empire.” In *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, edited by Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sharma, Sarah. 2010. “Taxi Cab Publics and the Production of Brown Space After 9/11.” *Cultural Studies* 24 (2): 183–99.
- Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Shyrock, Andrew. 2008. “The Moral Analogies of Race: Arab American Identity, Color Politics, and the Limits of Racialized Citizenship.” In *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, edited by Nadine Naber and Amaney A. Jamal, 81–113. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Siddall, Gillian, and Ellen Waterman. 2016. *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Simms, Rob. 2003. *The Repertoire of Iraqi Maqam*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Slate, Nico. 2012. *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Slobin, Mark. 1993. *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England (Wesleyan University Press).
- Small, Mark. 2003. “A Successful Liftoff in Valencia.” *Berklee Today*. 2003. <https://www.berklee.edu/berklee-today/fall-2013/successful-liftoff-in-valencia?page=show>.
- Smith, Sean. 2019. “Baghdad at Play: Normal Life Returns to Iraq’s Capital - In Pictures.” *The Guardian*, January 7, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2019/jan/07/baghdad-at-play-normal-life-returns-to-iraq-capital-in-pictures>.
- Solis, Gabriel. 2016. “From Jazz Pedagogy to Improvisation Pedagogy: Solving the Problem of Genre in Beginning Improvisation Training.” In *Improvisation and*

- Music Education: Beyond the Classroom, edited by Ajay Heble and Mark Laver, 96–106. New York: Routledge.
- Solis, Gabriel, and Bruno Nettl. 2009. *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Soneji, Davesh. 2013. "The Powers of Polyglossia: Marathi Kīrtan, Multilingualism, and the Making of a South Indian Devotional Tradition." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 17 (3): 339–69.
- Southern, Eileen. 1997. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Spellman, A. B. 1966. *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Baby: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64–81.
- Sriram, Aditya. 2016. "Vijay Iyer: Beyond Objects, Beyond Scores." *Guernica*, April 1, 2016. <https://www.guernicamag.com/beyond-objects-beyond-scores/>.
- Stanbridge, Alan. 2008. "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Jazz, Social Relations, and Discourses of Value." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 4 (1). <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v4i1.361>.
- Stanyek, Jason. 1999. "Articulating Intercultural Free Improvisation." *Resonance* 7 (2): 44–47.
- . 2004a. "Diasporic Improvisation and the Articulation of Intercultural Music." Dissertation, University of California, San Diego.
- . 2004b. "Transmissions of an Interculture: Pan-African Jazz and Intercultural Improvisation." In *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, edited by Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, 1st ed. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press.
- Stoeber, Jennifer Lynn. 2016a. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: NYU Press.
- . 2016b. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. NYU Press.
- Stuckey, Sterling. 1987. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA.

- Sudnow, David. 1993. *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- “Surveys of Iranian Americans.” 2018. PAAIA. June 12, 2018.
<https://paaia.org/CMS/survey-of-iranian-americans.aspx>.
- Swed, Mark. 2017. “Vijay Iyer Jazzes up the Ojai Music Festival.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2017. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ojai-festival-opening-review-20170609-story.html>.
- Tahir, Abdul-Jadil al-. 1952. “The Arab Community in the Chicago Area: A Comparative Study of the Christian-Syrian and the Muslim-Palestinians.” Dissertation, Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Tan, Marcus Cheng Chye. 2012. *Acoustic Interculturalism: Listening to Performance*. Studies in International Performance. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Taylor, Timothy Dean. 1997. *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*. New York: Routledge.
- Tehrani, John. 2008. *Whitewashed: America’s Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*. New York: NYU Press.
- Tenzen, Michael, and John Roeder. 2011. *Analytical and Cross-Cultural Studies in World Music*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tiongson Jr., Antonio T. 2015. “Afro-Asian Inquiry and the Problematics of Comparative Critique.” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1 (2): 33–58.
- Titon, Jeff Todd. 2008. “Knowing Fieldwork.” In *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, Second, 25–41. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Tsuge, Gen’ichi. 1972. “A Note on the Iraqi Maqam.” *Asian Music* 4 (1): 59–66.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1 (1): 1–40.
- Tucker, Sherrie. 2000. *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press.
- Turner, Richard. 1990. “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama.” In *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*,

- edited by Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.
- Ureña, Carolyn. 2017. "Loving from Below: Of (De)Colonial Love and Other Demons." *Hypatia* 32 (1): 86–102.
- Visweswaran, Kamala. 1994. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Von Eschen, Penny M. 2004. *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Color War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Waterman, Ellen. 2016. "Improvisation and the Audibility of Difference: Safa, Canadian Multiculturalism, and the Politics of Recognition." In *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, edited by Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, 283–306. Duke University Press.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. 2002. "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music." *Social Text* 20 (2): 21–47.
- Weidman, Amanda J. 2006. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Wilderson III, Frank B. 2003. "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal." *Social Justice* 30 (2): 18–27.
- . 2008. "Biko and the Problematics of Presence." In *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, edited by A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander, and N. Gibson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2010. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press.
- Wolfe, Tom. 1970. "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's." *New York Magazine*, June 8, 1970.
- Wong, Deborah. 2004. *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2008. "Moving From Performance to Performative Ethnography and Back Again." In *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, edited by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, 2nd ed., 76–89. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2016. "Faster and Louder: Heterosexist Improvisation in North American Taiko." In *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, edited

- by Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, 265–82. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press.
- Wong, Francis George. 2017. “Exploring Asian Improv.” Thesis, San Francisco State University.
- Wren, Toby. 2014. “Improvising Culture: Discursive Interculturality as a Critical Tool, Aesthetic, and Methodology for Intercultural Music.” Dissertation, Griffith University.
- Yancey, George A. 2003. *Who Is White?: Latinos, Asians, and the New Black/Nonblack Divide*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Yoshihara, Mari. 2008. *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Zia-Ebrahimi, Reza. 2011. “Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the ‘Aryan’ Discourse in Iran.” *Iranian Studies* 44 (4): 445–72.