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Melodies of a Sub-Subculture: Explorations of Asian American Creative Identity on the Fringe

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Melodies of a Sub-Subculture: Explorations of Asian American Creative Identity on the Fringe

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Integrated Composition, Improvisation, and Technology (ICIT)

by

Borey Shin

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Kojiro Umezaki, Chair
Professor Nicole Mitchell
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Professor Simon Leung

2019

DEDICATION

To

my family and friends.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Melodies of a Sub-Subculture: Explorations of Asian American Creative Identity on the Fringe

By

Borey Shin

Doctor of Philosophy in Integrated Composition, Improvisation, and Technology (ICIT)

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Associate Professor Kojiro Umezaki, Chair

Melodies of a Sub-*Subculture: Explorations of Asian American Creative Identity on the Fringe*, is an examination of Asian American identity within underground music communities, as well as an investigation of the alienation and melancholia that often accompany this position. It is a practice-based dissertation that manifests in the production of an album and subsequent album release performance. The written portion of the dissertation contextualizes the creative work in a body of scholarship dealing with Asian American identity and so-called "underground" music. It examines the simultaneous openness and exclusivity of underground music scenes, and it also examines the creative and aesthetic choices made in my work as they relate to my own identity.

INTRODUCTION

I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

That's what it is to have the presumption to insinuate oneself into these forbidden places, to shatter their silence if only by murmurs, by babblings … with the most timid, prudent words … Let them once penetrate, and they are certain to introduce others…

—Nathalie Sarraute, *The Use of Speech*

Melodies of a Sub-*Subculture: Explorations of Asian American Creative Identity on the Fringe*, is an examination of Asian American identity within underground music communities, as well as an investigation of the alienation and melancholia that often accompany this position. It is a practice-based dissertation that manifests in the production of an album and subsequent album release performance. The written portion of the dissertation contextualizes the creative work in a body of scholarship dealing with Asian American identity and so-called "underground" music. It examines the simultaneous openness and exclusivity of underground music scenes, and it also examines the creative and aesthetic choices made in my work as they relate to my own identity.

This project started as a way to examine the nature of the alienation I experience as a participant in underground music communities. I found that these feelings align with the alienation I experience as an Asian American, dealing with the model minority myth, constantly navigating the polarities of black and white culture, and seeing very little representation of Asian Americans in media growing up. This project considers the intersection of both of these

alienations by considering Asian American creative identities in underground or fringe music contexts through the lens of racial melancholia. In considering the invisibility of Asian American voices in these communities, I found that these marginalized identities occupy a precarious space in the underground. More minority voices belong in these communities, but I am not merely interested in demonstrating that Asian American engagement with the underground can be a subversive gesture or some expression of agency. Rather, I am interested in the paradoxical nature of this engagement, including the simultaneous inclusivity and exclusivity of these scenes, the expectation to be an artist/activist, the contradictory expectation to render ethnic identity invisible, and the expectation that the work will sound "Asian." I wrestle with these entanglements through a creative project that places emphasis on the process of carrying out this project within the underground community. Through qualities that reflect simplicity, melody, tonality, lo-fi and DIY aesthetics, my creativity, as process and research, grapples with the ambiguity of Asian American identity and aims to thrive in this ambiguity. Like Grace Wang, I also "seek to illuminate not only the racial soundtracks that powerfully shape narratives about music but also the ineffable yearnings—for beauty, freedom, self-definition, and community—that music simultaneously thwarts, fulfills, and inspires in racialized subjects."[1]

This dissertation draws from research done on Asian American music by ethnomusicologist, Deborah Wong. Wong questions the existence or even need for the term Asian American music. Rather, she establishes a model of Asian Americans *making* music, giving focus to the act of making music and finding meaning within this process.[2] Wong writes that so much of the job of the ethnomusicologist is to prove that music can wield some sort of

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[1] Grace Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 27.
[2] Deborah Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.

agency, especially for disenfranchised communities, but to do so automatically assumes a

disempowered position: "Ethnomusicologists pour much of our critical effort into explaining that

music has power, is powerful, and has effects. Of course it does, it is, and it always will, but

engaging in that dialectic activates ideologies of the transcendent, or the master's tools, or both.

If we have to actually explain how and why music is political, we have already lost."[3] Deborah

Wong expresses frustration of operating under the umbrella of ethnomusicology and seeks to

move beyond explaining how and why music is political. Grace Wang is another scholar central

to my work. In *Soundtracks of Asian America: Navigating Race Through Musical Performance*,

she explores the constant struggle between assimilation and marginalization. Wang provides a

point of reference for various Asian American groups tackling issues of identity through music,

especially those involved in Western classical music and popular music. While Deborah Wong,

Grace Wang, and others have made significant contributions to this field, my own contribution to

existing scholarship will focus on Asian American performance practices in underground music

communities. While there have been several scholarly studies covering Asian American

underground or subversive *visual* media, like early Asian American cinema or visual art

collectives, *Godzilla* for example,[4] Asian American discourse in the realm of sound is still

heavily centered around popular music, Western classical music, or jazz. There has been very

little written about Asian American underground musicians specifically, and I hope to change

this by also including perspectives of those artists who are currently active in underground

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[3] Deborah Wong, "Sound, Silence, Music: Power," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2014): 352. Wong's mention of "the master's tools" is a reference to Audre Lorde's essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."

[4] Margo Machida and Peter Feng are some examples of scholars who have extensively covered these fields.

communities around the country today. This dissertation also departs from existing scholarly research in this field because my main mode of inquiry is through creative practice.

In what follows, I will provide a framework for exploring the notion of *sub*-subculture in my work. Firstly, I will provide a background of Asian American music making in the context of contemporary Asian American history. I will then briefly explore ideas of musical communities or scenes and use these insights to inform a working definition of the term "underground" as it pertains to my dissertation. I acknowledge that the term "underground" is highly malleable. There may even be different implications whether the term is used as a noun or an adjective. It is almost impossible to dictate what constitutes as underground or not, and there is potential for further complications if one were to impose levels of underground-ness. So rather than providing a strict definition, I delineate certain boundaries outlining the underground, while keeping in mind the fickle nature of the term. Following this, I pair this highly unstable notion of underground with the equally ambiguous and malleable concept of Asian American, thereby proposing the term, *sub*-subculture. I will then provide the methodology for this dissertation and a chapter breakdown.

Asian Americans Making Music

Much has been written on Asian American history. Comprehensive histories and illuminating analyses on Asian American literature can be found in the work of esteemed Asian American scholars such as Lisa Lowe, William Wei, David Palumbo-Liu, Yen Le Espiritu, to name just a few. In the following section, I will give a brief overview of Asian American music making in the context of the Asian American movement and its subsequent history.

The notion of Asian American as a political identity was unbeknownst to me for the majority of my life. I do not recall the struggle of Asian Americans included in any of my elementary, middle, or high school curricula. Charlie Chin, one member of the iconic Asian American band that recorded the album *A Grain of Sand*, puts it aptly:

> "Currently when you say Asian American, all it means is that you are of Asian descent. But originally, it was a loaded word, an explosive phrase that defined a position, a very important position: I am not a marginalized person. I don't apologize for being Asian. I start with the premise that we have a long and involved history here of participation and contribution and I have a right to be here."[5]

Like so many others of my generation, I understood *Asian American* as a mere demographic category, and it was not until much later in my life when discovered that it was indeed a loaded and explosive term, as Chin phrases it. I became compelled to examine the tenuous, ambivalent and at times alienating reality of my bicultural identity. I learned that Asian Americans simply did not exist before the 1960s, as Madeline Hsu writes, "the category 'Asian American' is a misnomer until we reach the late 1960s, when nativity and shared experience in the United States had finally produced a generation that found more in common through the country of their birth than the countries of their ancestors."[6] Thus the descriptor, "Asian American" emerged as a way to unite those of Asian descent who shared common experiences of xenophobia and racism in the United States. The term originated in light of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. The struggle for political inclusion and equal rights led to the emergence of this panethnic Asian American identity. As Daryl J. Maeda writes, this movement was based on two fundamental premises: "first, that Asians of all ethnicities in the United States shared a common racial

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[5] Charlie Chin, as cited by Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve The People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (New York: Verso), 3.
[6] Madeline Y. Hsu, *Asian American History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), xix.

oppression, and second, that building a multiethnic, racially based coalition would provide an effective basis for resisting racism."[7] The Vietnam War and the antiwar movement were crucial in unifying Asian Americans. The rhetoric of the war "catalyzed the development of an Asian American identity, mainly because it reawakened the sociomilitary phenomenon known as 'gookism.'"[8] The term, used previously during the Korean War, was used derogatorily towards Asians abroad and in the United States.[9] It made no distinctions between Asian ethnicities. Thus Asian Americans who opposed the war also fought against racist attitudes toward Asians that crept into American consciousness as a result of the war, thereby racializing antiwar activism. During this time, the trio of Chris Iijima, Nobuko Miyamoto, and Charlie Chin was a prominent group that utilized music as a tool for activism. Chris and Nobuko were activists who met in 1970 at the convention of the Japanese American Citizens League in an effort to pressure the organization to oppose the Vietnam War.[10] They began writing songs in the storytelling style of modern American folk music, popularized by Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and others.[11] Similar to the messages of their peers, their songs expressed antiwar sentiments, but unlike their white counterparts, they told stories about the Asian American struggle. Chris and Nobuko soon met guitarist, Charlie Chin and began to play as a trio at protests and demonstrations all throughout the country. In 1973, they recorded and released the album *A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle by Asians in America*, which is sometimes referred to as the first Asian American

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[7] Daryl J. Maeda, "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness, 1969-1972," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005): 1081.

[8] William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 38.

[9] Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 38.

[10] Ishizuka, *Serve The People*, 139-141.

[11] Carole Pegg, "Folk music," *Grove Music Online*, (Oxford University Press, 2001) accessed April, 30 2019, https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000009933. The use of folk music here is in reference to the singer-songwriter style of American music that began to take shape in the 1960s.

album.[12] The messages that their songs conveyed were politically explicit and expressed the struggles of the Asian American experience.

Equally influential to the Asian American movement was the Black Power movement: "For Asian Americans, adopting black power's antipathy toward assimilation marked a significant departure from previous modes of political mobilization."[13] Espousing the radicalism of the Black Panther party and its resistance to American imperialism, students at San Francisco State College and University of California, Berkeley organized protests on campus under the organization of the Third World Liberation Front from 1968 to 1969. The protests led to the establishment of Ethnic Studies programs at these universities. Other activist groups, such as the Red Guard Party rejected any notion of assimilation and instead sought to strengthen the institutions of San Francisco's Chinatown. The Red Guard Party was a radical activist group notably influenced by the Black Power movement. In fact, the formation of the organization in 1969 was facilitated by members of the Black Panther Party. The Red Guard Party even adopted its 10 Point Program from the Black Panther Party by changing "black" to "yellow." This was significant because it discarded assimilative attitudes in favor of a self-determined, reactionary stance in line with the Black Power movement. Using the term "yellow" also signaled a call to arms to Asian Americans of all ethnic backgrounds, not only Chinese Americans.[14] The Asian American adoption of the Black Power movement incited the formation of Asian American identity. The cultural movement that accompanied the Black Power movement, the Black Arts movement, was equally influential to Asian American artists and musicians. Susan Asai writes that the "creative force of the Black Arts movement gave birth to Asian American literary and

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[12] Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 66.
[13] Maeda, "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen," 1084.
[14] Ibid., 1090.

visual art collectives in San Francisco and New York, forming the cultural backdrop of Asian American music. Asian Americans determined to change their powerless and invisible social status as the silent minority reached for cultural forms that liberated them and gave them a voice that could bolster their new identity and political visibility."[15] Asian American jazz musicians were especially influenced by the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), one of the most important music collectives to emerge from the the Black Arts movement.[16] As a political activist and saxophonist, Fred Ho, who I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1, embodied the convergence of ideals drawn from the Black Arts movement and Asian American identity. Fred Ho was one of the most influential figures of the Asian American Creative Music Movement that began to take shape in the 1970s and 1980s, centralized in the San Francisco Bay Area.[17] Other figures important to this movement include pianist Jon Jang, bassist Mark Izu, pianist Glenn Horiuchi, and saxophonist Francis Wong, amongst others. The organization Asian Improv aRts (AIR), which started as a record label and subsequently grew to become a hub of Asian American Creative Music, was started in 1987. One of their goals is "to make it possible for artists to create innovative works that are rooted in the diasporic experiences of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage."[18] Drawing from the ideologies of the AACM, Asian Improv aRts sought to create a similar space for Asian American creativity.

While these musicians may not have necessarily identified as activists, their artistic lives were very much intertwined with the Asian American movement. A pivotal moment for the

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[15] Susan M. Asai, "Cultural Politics: The African American Connection in Asian American Jazz-Based Music," *Asian Music* 36, no. 1 (2005): 93.
[16] James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 13.
[17] Michael Dessen, "Asian Americans and Creative Music Legacies," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 1, no. 3 (2006), https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v1i3.56.
[18] "About Asian Improv aRts," Asian Improv aRts, accessed April 30, 2019, http://www.asianimprov.org/about.

Asian American movement was the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982. During a low point for the

American auto industry, many blamed the Japanese for taking away jobs in the industry. In

Detroit, two white autoworkers murdered Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man. They believed

Chin to be Japanese and accosted him with racial slurs. Each perpetrator was given a sentence of

three years' probation and a fine of $3,000. This underwhelmingly light sentence caused shock

and uproar around the Asian American community in Detroit and spawned the formation of the

organization, American Citizens for Justice. The organization appealed to the U.S. Justice

Department and fought for a retrial. While they did manage to pressure the Justice Department to

retry the case, they were unsuccessful in convicting the perpetrators. However, the Chin case was

a pivotal moment in Asian American history because it galvanized Asians of diverse

backgrounds to come together to protest this gross injustice. Even though Vincent Chin was

Chinese American, the case was based on a mistaken identity, and the victim could have easily

been from any Asian background. The Chin case helped foster a pan-Asian identity amongst

Asian Americans and ushered in a new phase of the Asian American movement.[19] Chin's tragic

story prompted strong reactions from Asian American artists, including pianist Jon Jang who

dedicated his second album, *Are you Chinese or Charlie Chan?* (1984), to Vincent Chin. As a

project that aimed to address core issues of the Asian American movement, funded by the Asian

American community in San Francisco, and dedicated to a crucial figure of the movement in

Chin, this album was a total Asian American effort.[20]

In addition to striving for social justice, the Asian American movement also sought to

reclaim aspects of Asian heritage and culture that were lost in efforts to assimilate: "the

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[19] Pei-te Lien, *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 56-59.
[20] Dessen, "Asian Americans and Creative Music Legacies."

underlying motivation for activism was concern over personal identity, all the rhetoric about politics notwithstanding. Asian Americans realized that in trying to be assimilated 'Americans' they had rejected Asian culture and accepted the values and attitudes of European American people."[21] This rejection of Asian culture in an effort to assimilate led to the proliferation of the "model minority" myth. While on the surface, the myth reflects the relative economic success that Asian Americans have achieved, it is detrimental to the cause of the Asian American movement by effectively erasing aspects of Asian culture and rendering Asian Americans invisible. Karen Shimakawa writes, "Indeed, the popular depiction of Asian Americans as a 'model minority' illustrates the very contradictions that characterize abjection … The ambivalence of abjection is coded into the oxymoronic term itself, which embraces Asian Americanness as exemplary of the correct embodiment of Americanness even as it marks that group out as distinguishable from 'normal' Americanness by virtue of its racialized minority status."[22] In other words, the term "model minority" is the site of abjection because of its paradoxical nature. Asian Americans are expected to be model citizens, while maintaining their outsider minority status. The rhetoric of this term insures that Asian Americans remain perpetual outsiders.

The paradox of the model minority myth is especially apparent in Asian American participation in Western classical music. Grace Wang explores the complex relationships of race and power in the context of Asian and Asian American involvement in classical music. Rather than drawing directly from performers of classical music, she primarily examines the performance of Asian identity by so-called "music moms." She argues that while these parents

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[21] Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 43.
[22] Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 13.

seemingly perpetuate certain Asian stereotypes of the persistent and hard-working model minority, they are in fact using culture as a tool to regain agency in a society that essentially renders minority identities invisible. The adoption of Western classical music by Japan, China and Korea in the early 20th century became a symbol of status in those (then) developing countries. This history strongly informs Asian and Asian American attitudes towards classical music today and is evidenced by the numerous parents Wang interviews at the prestigious institution, the Juilliard Pre-College program. For some parents, the sacrifices they make for their children's pursuit of classical music is a moral obligation and is worthwhile because it instills discipline and concentration, both traits commonly associated with being "Asian." The irony is that these traits are proliferated through the model minority myth and are desirable because they adhere to the hegemonic structures in place. Wang writes, "although classical music may well represent the music genre most closely associated with Asian Americans in the contemporary period—indeed, playing the violin and/or piano is itself part of the stereotypical embodiment of what it means to be a middle-class Asian American—its cultural capital continues to rest on an investment in whiteness."[23] Asian American involvement in classical music is inherently paradoxical. On the one hand, playing classical music becomes inherently "Asian," but only through the lens of the dominant culture. Yet at the same time, the Asian usurpation of the Western classical music tradition can be seen as a subversive act, allowing Asian Americans to create an identity of their own and place themselves superior to an oppressive mainstream culture.[24]

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[23] Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America*, 12.
[24] Ibid., 28-63.

In the realm of popular music and popular media, the model minority myth is just as prevalent. Furthermore, issues of representation and authenticity that emerge through engagement with American vernacular music are more pressing. While Asian Americans are still largely invisible in popular music, there have been a number of artists able to break into the mainstream. YouTube and other social media platforms have also been an alternative way for Asian Americans to achieve mainstream success. *Far East Movement* is an electronic music/hip-hop group that rose to immense popularity with their single, "Like a G6" in 2010. As a pan-ethnic Asian group, including members of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Korean descent, they achieved unprecedented success, becoming the first Asian American group to top the Billboard Hot 100.[25] Yet despite their success, or perhaps because of it, they shied away from addressing issues of identity. The group chooses to approach music making in a way that suggests that they have moved beyond racial barriers, but Wang argues that the "superficial veneer of their lyrics suggest the extent to which the grounds of a postracial landscape rest on an investment in a capitalist structure built upon a racial logic."[26] In other words, part of the group's continued success depends on the erasure of their Asian identities. In recent years, new media outlets have provided alternative ways for Asian Americans to circumvent this erasure and still appeal to a greater audience. Sites like YouTube, have been important for hip-hop artists like Dumbfoundead and Awkwafina. Dumbfoundead is a Korean American hip-hop musician who achieved visibility through viral YouTube videos showcasing his battle rap conquests. Unlike *Far East Movement*, Dumbfoundead does not shy away from broaching topics of identity. His lyrics often describe the challenges of being Asian American. While platforms like YouTube

[25] Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America*, 16.
[26] Ibid., 18.

have come along way for Asian Americans to be able to reach a wider audience, Eun-Young

Jung argues that,

> "Still, it is not a panacea for racial exclusion, as the primary medium for distributing music is in the form of video materials, in which the racial identity of the musicians is almost always clearly visible. The musician with an Asian face and an Asian body—raised in the United States, natively fluent in American English, a passionate consumer and performer of one or more forms of American popular music—sounds American, looks Asian. He or she is subject to the racialized judgments of social media users, but at least the choice is there on YouTube."[27]

Jung writes that Asian American YouTube celebrities continue to receive racialized remarks in

the YouTube comments section, but she argues that, at the very least, they are visible and well

represented unlike in traditional popular media. The topic of Asian Americans in popular and

new media is a rapidly evolving field, especially with the popularity of films like *Crazy Rich

Asians* and the massive success of k-pop (Korean popular music). There are many incredible

nuances in this shifting landscape that are important but are out of the direct scope of this

dissertation. But these changes can serve as a reminder that Asian American identity is

constantly and actively being redefined. A central guiding principle for this dissertation is that

Asian American identity is one that is constantly in flux.

Delineating the Underground

In the following section, I will delineate several key terms in regards to underground

music that are relevant to my dissertation. In attempting to parse out the term "underground," it

is important to consider what is above-ground. Ethnomusicologist, Mark Slobin in his essay

Micromusics of the West: A Comparative Approach, explores the dynamics of micromusic (or

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[27] Eun-Young Jung, "Transnational Migrations and YouTube Sensations: Korean Americans, Popular Music, and Social Media," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 1 (2014): 57.

subcultural music) in the West. In order to elucidate the relationship between the hegemony of mainstream commercial music and various subcultural musics, Slobin proposes the use of the terms *subculture, superculture* and *interculture*. While these terms tend to delineate music across ethnic or national lines, and not necessarily across stylistic or aesthetic differences in music, his terms are helpful in defining what constitutes as "mainstream" or "underground."[28] Describing the term *superculture,* Slobin writes: "It implies an umbrella-like, overarching structure which could be present anywhere in the system-ideology or practice, concept or performance. The usual, the accepted, the statistically lopsided, the commercially successful, the statutory, the regulated, the most visible: these all belong to the superculture."[29] He further clarifies the concept of superculture using several key criteria. One is the presence of industry. He writes that the music industry entitles powerful entities such as major corporations or the church to convey their message through an artist who becomes a commodity. The commodity attains mass appeal through dizzying amounts of advertising. The superculture necessitates the product and its marketability be more important than the quality of the work. The second characteristic of superculture is the presence of the state in our everyday musical lives. Slobin argues that the government infiltrates our musical lives in profound ways. For example, this could include national songs played at major sporting events or music curriculums in primary school. These curriculums that are introduced to young students eventually pave the way, for those who decide to pursue a career as a professional musician, to higher education programs where the focus is overwhelmingly on classical or jazz music. The third facet of superculture is that it "provides a set of standardized styles, repertoires, and performance practices anyone can recognize, if not

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[28] Mark Slobin, "Micromusics of the West: A Comparative Approach," *Ethnomusicology* 36, No. 1 (1992): 1-87.
[29] Ibid., 15.

like - a common coin of the musical national currency we all carry around every day."[30] This may include general assumptions on the music making process, the contexts in which music is performed or evaluated (concert halls, bars) or the stereotypes and typical career paths for musicians that are quietly enforced.

In the context of my research, the term "underground" refers to musical communities or scenes working to subvert aspects of Slobin's "superculture." Challenging Slobin's first tenet of superculture, underground music communities resist treating their work as pure commodity. Artists are free to experiment and present highly individualistic work without the pressure to appease a mass audience. Underground communities also upend Slobin's second tenet of superculture by resisting traditions of practice inculcated by the state starting in grade school music curriculums evolving into the classical and jazz programs of conservatories and universities. While underground artists may borrow from these traditions or even be rooted in them, they strive to create work that is not strictly defined by the stylistic boundaries that these traditions impose.

Thus one key aspect of underground communities is their active resistance against the hegemony of music that dominates the industry as well as our everyday lives. While one way to delineate the underground is to name what it stands in opposition to, these communities are also often marked by distinct characteristics of their own. Stephen Graham, in one of the few comprehensive texts devoted to underground music, provides several guiding criteria for delineating underground music. Most of Graham's criteria are helpful in giving a general idea of underground communities, but they are by no means defining characteristics. One criterion is that it will usually be found outside of large institutions. Another characteristic is that it will

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[30] Ibid., 18.

"largely adhere to self-determining models of production, promotion, and distribution." These self-determining models are what is commonly referred to as the DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetic. A third characteristic is that the work rarely has any commercial or mainstream appeal. Lastly, Graham writes that underground music will be "aesthetically challenging or complex."[31] This last generalization is contentious and one that I would like to refute in my work. A work that is challenging does not have to be complex. Aesthetic complexity is highly subjective, and I have experienced that it is not a permeating quality of the work in the underground, based on my own personal involvement in these communities. Although, I do acknowledge that this may be a common misconception that the general public has about underground music, and one that I will challenge and address through my creative project. For the purposes of my research, the underground does not necessarily claim any aesthetic qualities. I will use the term more as a social delineation, albeit one that is fluid and one whose boundaries are constantly in flux. The underground may share qualities with work that is considered experimental or avant-garde, including embodiment of anti-establishment values and lack of mainstream appeal. But these are terms that may specify a certain aesthetic, one that the underground is not necessarily defined by.

While I provide a working definition of the term underground, there are problematic aspects of the politics and economy of the underground in the context of our current times. In late 2017, *The Guardian* published a series of articles dealing with the term underground and its implications in today's internet age. It poses the question, if content is so widely accessible through the internet, does the "underground" even exist today? Through a series of articles highlighting obscure music communities from underground metal to punk from a small town in northern England, the publication seems to provide an affirmative answer to the question.

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[31] Stephen Graham, *Sounds of the Underground* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 17.

However, it also details ways in which the landscape has significantly changed. More and more, brands like Red Bull or Vans, are sponsoring alternative artists operating under the genre described by the article as "leftfield pop." While these artists, even with some "pop" sensibilities, are not very likely to make it into the pantheon of Top 40, their careers are fueled by these corporations that are using alternative artists to prop up their image as forward-thinking and youth-friendly, not necessarily for monetary gains. Also, social media platforms have allowed little known artists to gain widespread attention very quickly, further obscuring the concept of underground in today's society.[32] While the term underground may seem to be losing relevance in today's culture, Stephen Graham argues that despite the accessibility that the Internet affords us, the average music fan would still have a difficult time locating for example, "three-hour drone albums or seven-minute noise screeds."[33] In fact, he argues that this wide accessibility of information may be a non-factor in the perpetuation of the underground. He writes that the "willingness of the general public either to turn away or to ignore its existence in the first place has been the historical source of the underground's marginality and reclusion, not that public's inability to locate it."[34] So despite the concern about the disappearance of the underground, it's possible that the terms of the underground are changing but it is not in danger of disappearing.

The *Sub*-Subculture

My research deals with what I term a *sub*-subculture, by specifically focusing on Asian American artists operating in underground artistic communities. This distinction is especially

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[32] Alexis Petridis, "Where Is The Musical Underground in 2017?" *The Guardian*, last modified October 9, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/music/ng-interactive/2017/oct/09/where-is-the-musical-underground-in-2017.

[33] Graham, *Sounds of the Underground*, 11.

[34] Ibid.

important to challenge the detrimental effects of the superculture on the perception of underrepresented communities. Slobin writes that the activity of the superculture "affects subcultures in two ways: through erasure and stereotypes. Erasure is implicit in the unsung melodies of a hundred micromusics, missing from the classrooms of Euro-America. Like the lack of one's language, the absence of familiar music sends a clear supercultural signal to children. Stereotypes crop up everywhere, often as a part of officially sponsored cultural pluralism."[35] While Slobin writes about the harmful effects of the superculture in erasing and stereotyping the experiences of racial minorities, my work investigates the doubly-marginalized status of Asian American participation in underground music communities, hence the term *sub*-subculture. There are very few Asian American musicians operating in underground communities. These few artists working in this *sub*-subculture occupy a paradoxical space, but they can challenge the stereotypes promulgated by the mass media by creating unique work that resists labels. The void left by the erasures of the superculture need to be filled, and underground music communities offer individualistic ways in which an Asian American artist can assert their presence.

My decision to pursue research about underground music stems from my personal investment as a participator in these communities, especially those in New York City, Boston, and Los Angeles. It is within these communities that I found the courage to express my creativity freely, but it is also where I experienced alienation as an Asian American artist. The underground, similar to Asian American identity, is a site that is just as malleable and constantly in flux: "the underground and the fringe are heuristic concepts whose 'reality' is fragmentary and

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[35] Slobin, "Micromusics of the West," 16.

incomplete and continually being formed and reformed."[36] There is currently a lack of scholarly

discussion that integrates these two fields. Andrew John Kluth's recent dissertation, *A Study of*

the Los Angeles DIY Experimental Music Scene: Reflections on the Promise of the Possible from

2018 mentions the overwhelming lack of diversity in these circles. Kluth writes that, "due to

racial, socioeconomic and even geographic exigencies as well as issues of access and exposure,

the most visible musical experimentalists making the cultural realities of Los Angeles

experimentalism would be white males."[37] While Kluth acknowledges this reality and even

briefly expounds on the situation, it is not the main focus of his dissertation. Stephen Graham

also admits in his comprehensive text on underground music that, "hugely important issues such

as gender, race, class, and other social frameworks of oppression are also not covered in anything

like enough depth."[38] My work, through auto-ethnography, critical readings of texts, and creative

practice, addresses at least one of these missing frameworks of oppression.

Methodology

       The primary method of research for this dissertation is a process-oriented creative

project. This process, which is commonplace practice of underground musicians, is divided into

several phases. First, I compose and develop a set of music to be performed solo. I perform

several solo shows, constantly workshopping this material. This set of music is refined and

eventually developed into an album. Plans are made to release the album on cassette tape via an

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[36] Graham, *Sounds of the Underground*, 6.
[37] Andrew John Kluth, "A Study of the Los Angeles DIY Experimental Music Scene: Reflections on the Promise of the Possible" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2018), 117.
[38] Graham, *Sounds of the Underground*, 16.

underground music tape label. Finally, the project culminates in an album release performance involving other musicians and artists.

The project is documented through all of these phases, and it considers the spectrum that spans individual artistry and the navigation of social networks that include managers of DIY spaces and tape labels as well as other artists. The creative project and process are analyzed in the context of alienation within underground music and Asian American identity. The written portion of the dissertation also examines Asian American creative identities operating in the underground through frameworks of racial melancholia and the promise of universalism.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 provides personal histories of current and historical Asian American figures operating on the fringe, and how they develop their own personal/artistic identities. I examine their alienation within their circles, how they manage their marginalization, and how they make their music reverberate with the community at large.

Chapter 2 locates the marginalization of Asian Americans through the lens of racial melancholia. This chapter also provides analysis of the discourse on universalism in the arts.

Chapter 3 connects the theories explored in Chapter 2 to the creative project. It provides an overview of the project and describes technical details as well as the conceptual forces behind the project. It takes into consideration themes of lo-fi, melody, and simplicity and how they inform my work. It also considers the process of collaboration with others involved in the project.

CHAPTER 1. The *Sub*-Subculture—Asian American Creative Identities on the Fringe

I have chosen to present sketches of four distinct Asian American artists operating in the underground community using intersectionality as framework to examine the artists themselves, their work, and their relationship to their communities. Intersectionality provides a compelling framework to examine artists because we can come to a deeper understanding of their work by analyzing the complex ways in which the multiplicities of identity inform their work.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, is "a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics."[39] Crenshaw developed this term in the context of black feminist discourse as a reaction to the "tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis."[40] Intersectionality exposes "how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice."[41] It considers the ways both race and gender interact with each other to shape the identity of an individual. In the past few decades, intersectionality has become a major scholarly movement to include the various intersections of not only race and gender, but class, sexuality, age and nationality as well. It is a framework for conceptualizing multiple layers of discrimination faced by an individual or social group. Intersectionality takes into account the multiplicities of identities and experiences to better understand discrimination and prejudices.

Using intersectional strategies, we can empower marginalized artists by asserting individuality borne out of an amalgamation of different strands of identity. We can also discover

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[39] Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 787.
[40] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139.
[41] Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies," 787.

how the work of minority artists can be perceived differently by the public. Combating the stereotypes attributed to these artists, intersectionality can show how highly individualistic work arises out of complex identity formations. Furthermore, we can take a musical approach to intersectionality. In addition to taking into account race, class and gender, we can also examine musical signifiers of identity including choice of instrument, which music scenes they align themselves with, or what stylistic labels they choose to characterize their music.

The four artists I chose to examine, Nam June Paik, Fred Ho, Okkyung Lee, and C. Spencer Yeh represent a chronological lineage of Asian American musicians. Each artist embodies a unique version of Asian American, reflecting the transformation of the term over time. "Asian American" took on wildly different meanings throughout their respective careers. Paik arrived in the United States (by way of Korea, Japan and Germany) in the 1950s before the term existed as a panethnic coalition for social justice. Fred Ho, born in California in 1957, fully embraced the concept of Asian American as a sociopolitical movement and was actively involved in groups fighting for social equality. Lee arrived in the United States in the '90s as an adult, following the mass wave of Asian immigrants in the '70s and '80s that altered the original political underpinnings of the term. Finally, C. Spencer Yeh was born in Taiwan and moved to North America in 1980 at a very young age. Each artist also has a unique relationship to the underground. I will use an intersectional lens to unwrap these artists' aesthetics and perspectives in relationship to their sense of identity, their relationship to their Asian American identity, as well as their community.

Nam June Paik (1932-2006)

While Nam June Paik is often labelled as "the father of video art,"[42] it represents only a fraction of the world of Nam June Paik. Not only was he a video artist, but he was also a performance artist, composer, and sculptor. The depth of Paik's artistry was multi-faceted, just as his background and upbringing were. Paik, though racially Asian, had a convoluted cultural upbringing. He was born in South Korea in 1932. In 1949, his family was forced to move to Hong Kong with the onset of the Korean War. A year later, he attended university in Tokyo. Upon graduating in 1956, Paik travelled to Germany to continue studies in music composition. In 1964, he finally settled in New York City.

Such a wide range of exposure to different cultures must have had an influence on Paik's work. Kate Millett believes that Paik's multicultural background helped him to construct a shield around himself: "If Tokyo was hard, what was it like in Germany? Maybe he had built a shell, had already perfected that manner of being a foreigner, a refugee artist: thick-skinned, a little strange, a little funny, a bit of a clown, harmless, diffident, ineffably an outsider."[43] While Paik necessarily had to wear many different hats, his status as outsider would never change. The rather mild characterization of Paik being a little funny and harmless belies the violent and destructive qualities of his piece, *One for Violin Solo* (1962), where a violin is brutally smashed into two pieces in one blow, but this violence is perhaps not so surprising given Paik's status as a perpetual foreigner. There are a number of allusions taking place here. The violin, as object, is so often a revered symbol of civility and culture. The destruction of such a sacred object can be

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[42] David A. Ross, "Nam June Paik's Videotapes," in *Nam June Paik*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in Association with W.W. Norton, 1982), 101.
[43] Kate Millett, "Bonyari," in *Nam June Paik: Video Time, Video Space*, ed. Toni Stooss and Thomas Kellein (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 111.

seen as a subversive act against the institution of Classical music. But the manner in which this action takes place is interesting. It is not simply an act of ruthless destruction. The violin is meditatively raised above the head and is struck only once. So there is much more to this simple action piece than an anti-authoritarian message. *One for Violin Solo* was not merely a piece intended to shock. It can be seen as an audio-visual experience, inter-dependent on both aspects. Dieter Ronte writes, "Without sound, music made visual is incomplete in its visualization, its statement no longer intact … Music for Paik is but a sequence of tones, of primeval sounds that defy linguistic definition."[44] Thus, Paik is able to encapsulate multiple layers of meaning in one single statement, and it is powerful in its conciseness and precision. Is this quality derivative of Paik's Asian background? Ronte suggests, "Paik reduces his statement to one idea. In so doing, he recapitulates the European Renaissance tradition of individual genius: no longer craftsmen, artists had come into their own; they were paid not only for technical craftsmanship, but for what was called the 'idea.' Creative thought dominated the execution. In Paik's work we find a condensed Asian version of this European idea."[45] Ronte does not provide much support in his claim that Paik presents an Asian perspective on a European Renaissance tradition. Ronte seems to be writing off Paik's eccentricity as an Asian trait. It is evident in Paik's art that he valued the ideas behind his work far more than technical skill, but this is not necessarily an Asian spin on things. By reducing Paik's artistry to a "condensed Asian version" of a "European idea," Ronte also discounts Paik's formative years spent heavily involved in art and music circles in Germany. Ronte shows us but one example of the stereotypes and generalizations that beset the Asian American performer.

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[44] Dieter Ronte, "Nam June Paik's Early Works in Vienna," in *Nam June Paik* ed. John G. Hanhardt (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in Association with W.W. Norton, 1982), 74.
[45] Ibid., 78.

Elements of Paik's biography seem to carry significant weight among scholars when analyzing his work. Hanhardt writes, "Nam June Paik's unique achievement was to evolve a visionary persona which coalesced with his art. This singular construct, forged in an active appropriation of media and materials, became a Duchampian project of making autobiography the subtext of his art."[46] Hanhardt points out the importance of Paik's biography in relation to his work, but I have found that his biography works in two different ways. One the one hand, Paik draws from his experience as an Asian, European, and American. But on another, he is actively reacting to his past as oriental, foreigner, or exotic. This dichotomy is apparent in his work from 1974, *TV Buddha*. Despite the references to Buddhism that this piece invites, Paik does not have any serious religious inclinations. When asked, during an interview with Otto Hahn, if he was a Buddhist, Paik replies, "No, I'm an artist. And not a particularly religious one at that, I use Buddha as a symbol which I find easy to work with … Because I'm a friend of John Cage, people tend to see me as a Zen monk."[47] So just as in *One for Violin Solo*, where the idea behind this simple action is racialized as Asian, *TV Buddha* invites even more references to Paik's Asian background. But it was not Paik's intention to make the work solely derivative of his heritage. It would be easy for the public, through a piece like *TV Buddha*, to misconstrue Paik's identity as John Cage's Zen guru. Deeper understanding of Paik's biography completely discounts this–Zen imagery was an artistic tool for Paik that nudged the audience to reexamine their own perception of Paik. By re-contextualizing this sacred Buddha statue that is so often associated with the East, Paik is reacting against societal projections that delegate him as the "other." Thus Paik's work is

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[46] John G. Hanhardt, *Nam June Paik* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1982), 93.
[47] Nam June Paik, "Interview with Otto Hahn," interview by Otto Hahn, *Eine DATA Base*, (La Biennale di Venezia, XLV Esposizione Internationale D'Arte, Edition Gantz, 1993), 171.

a simultaneous appropriation of his multi-cultural background and a reaction against cultural and racial categorizations.

Fred Ho (1957-2014)

Fred Ho, baritone saxophonist, composer, writer and social activist, was highly influential to the development of the Asian American jazz scene of the '70s and '80s. Ho, who is Chinese American, was born in Palo Alto, California and grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts. Feeling alienated by his nearly all-white surroundings and having experienced domestic violence and racial violence at a young age, Ho became increasingly drawn to radical Black politics and art.[48] He became an ardent follower of the ideologies of Malcolm X, Black Panthers and Amiri Baraka. He identified himself as a "yellow revolutionary nationalist."[49] While attending Harvard University, Fred Ho became involved with the Boston Chinatown community where he volunteered to help garment workers who struggled to make a living. He also helped found the Asian American Resource Workshop (AARW), a pan-Asian political advocacy group supporting Asian Americans in the Boston area. While immersing himself in the Boston Chinatown community, Ho was also able to learn Chinese folk songs from the workers that he helped. Ho soon joined the activist group, I Wor Kuen. He also joined the Marxist-Leninist group, League of Revolutionary Struggle and was briefly a member of the Nation of Islam. Ho's involvement with these various political organizations greatly influenced his political and cultural identity, which in many ways serve as a foundation for his music.

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[48] Fred Ho, "Beyond Asian American Jazz: My Musical and Political Changes in the Asian American Movement," *Leonardo Music Journal* 9 (1999): 45.
[49] Ibid.

Ho was especially influenced by artists like John Coltrane, Archie Shepp and other prominent free jazz musicians of the '60s. Ho was particularly drawn to free jazz because it was a musical expression depicting the struggle for freedom. This music was powerful, soulful, often discarded conventional notions of rhythm and form, and ultimately evocative of the struggle for freedom. Ho's music incorporates elements of jazz while simultaneously striving for Asian American expressivity. What this Asian American expressivity should *sound* like is a point of contention. Ho believed that the "Asian American-ness of an artistic work lies in more than content, and is rooted and linked to cultural traditions and form."[50] In other words, work made by an Asian American does not necessarily make their work Asian American. The work must have some link to tradition. One way that Ho linked his work to cultural traditions was to incorporate traditional Chinese music into his compositions by integrating folk melodies and traditional instruments into his ensembles. Ho saw Asian American Jazz as "a revolutionary Asian American art/music that embraces tradition and change and that would not be imitative of Eurocentric and white pop forms but innovative by inheriting and expanding upon the continuum of Asian Pacific American cultures."[51] Ho's artistic expression was a means to subvert this Eurocentric dominance by drawing both from African American and Asian traditions. For Ho, the inclusion of traditional Chinese music into his own work meant much more than experiments in cross-cultural music. Rather, the significance of Chinese traditional music melding with jazz was the potential to depict Asian American struggles in his work. Furthermore, the incorporation of African American artistic expressions in Ho's work is not based on convenience or mere personal preference, but rather, it becomes a way to politicize his work. In a sense, Ho's work

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[50] Ho, "Beyond Asian American Jazz," 47.
[51] Ibid., 46.

becomes Asian American only when he incorporates elements of jazz: "While Asian American music may very well be cross-cultural, we in the 'Asian American jazz' movement saw as the focus of our music/cultural work to help catalyze Asian American consciousness about our oppression and need to struggle for liberation. The very identity and term 'Asian American' in our sobriquet 'Asian American jazz or music' is a political signifier."[52] Thus for Ho, the term "Asian American" attains political significance in the context of collaboration with African American cultural expressions. Fred Ho developed an identity closely linked to the struggle of African Americans and expressed this through his music: "The cross-fertilization of African American jazz and Asian music that became evident in his work reflected the genesis of his vision of rending the Eurocentric dominance and supremacy of white America and creating an 'Afro-Asian multicultural music expression … neither American nor Asian but quintessentially Asian American.'"[53] This Afro-Asian expression becomes quintessentially Asian American because it is a multicultural expression that challenges oppressive forces through the collaboration between African American and Asian identities.

Okkyung Lee (1975-)

Okkyung Lee is a prolific improviser, cellist and composer associated for a long time with the "downtown" music community of New York City. Originally from South Korea, Lee came to the United States to study improvised music and eventually immersed herself in musical worlds centered around venues such as Tonic and the Knitting Factory. As an Asian female

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[52] Ho, "Beyond Asian American Jazz," 47.
[53] Asai, "Cultural Politics: The African American Connection in Asian American Jazz-Based Music," 97.

musician operating in this heavily white male dominated music community, Lee is met with many prejudices and expectations.

She is often met with unfounded expectations of what her music should sound like. Lee, responding to a review of a performance that mentioned how unhappy Lee *looked* on stage while playing such exciting music, says,

> "Enough times it comes out as 'harmless' or even 'positive' sexist remarks but still with the same demeaning effect, such as describing everything I play as somehow related to my 'moods' or 'emotions' or an expectation of me to be 'nice' in person … I guess it simply reflects the society we live in unfortunately. We are still ridden with all the gender stereotypes and expectations and there isn't any simple solution. The only thing I can do is to keep making music that's true to myself while continuing to bring this issue up on the table whenever I get a chance."[54]

In the review, Lee says that there was no mention of the appearance or stage demeanor of her male bandmates. Lee speaks about the continuing challenges of being a female musician, even in a field such as improvised music, a supposedly open form where traditional musical stylings and conventions are "freed." Even in these circles, as a female musician, Lee is expected to play from an "emotional" state. She is met with the prejudice that women should not be so cerebral when making music. Lee challenges these stereotypes by making music that is true to herself. She does not need to live up to any expectation of how she should carry herself on stage. She asserts that her music can speak for itself but does not deny that her identity as a woman has no influence on her music-making. Instead she is asserting the multi-dimensionality of her being by refusing to conform to the expectations of a female musician and creating music that is expansive and multi-faceted.

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[54] Okkyung Lee, "Two To Your Right, Five To Your Left: Okkyung Lee Interviewed," interview by Adam Potts, *The Quietus*, March 26, 2015, http://thequietus.com/articles/17514-okkyung-lee-interview.

Using an intersectional lens to examine her work, we can better understand the multiple

dimensions of Lee's musicality. So often, being an improviser closely associated with John Zorn,

Lee is also met with expectations to perform a certain way. Over the span of her career. she has

developed a reputation of having an abrasive and aggressive approach to playing the cello and

improvising. On the one hand, this reputation of her playing completely subverts the stereotype

of the "submissive Asian female," but on the other, to typecast Lee as a musician only capable of

playing loud and aggressive music is unfair and does not reflect the full breadth of her

musicality. In addition to her improvising, she has also recorded several albums as a bandleader

that feature her melodic compositions. She speaks about the dichotomy between her approaches

to improvising and composing:

> "When I'm improvising, it's all about the sounds and the flow right then. I just want to
> dig into that as deep as possible while letting things happen. That's why I'm hooked on
> improvisation, I think. As I describe it to some people, it's the moment when I'm
> constantly bouncing between the right and the left side of my brain. It's both frightening
> and exciting because you are in control and, at the same time, you're not. It's a bit
> different when I write music, I suppose, since I actually have time to ponder.
> Interestingly enough when I write music, I find myself more connected to my identity as
> a Korean. I can feel my ties to all those songs I grew up listening to."[55]

In a way, Lee's improvising and composing seem to be two separate outlets for her creativity.

While improvising allows her to be in the moment, letting things just happen, composing seems

to be a way to slow down and express her Korean identity. Yet one cannot exist without the

other, similar to the way her identity as both female and Korean cannot be treated as separate

entities. There is almost always some element of improvisation in her compositions, and

compositional ideas seep into her improvising, as she bounces between the left and right sides of

her brain. Using intersectionality to look at Lee's work is an interesting task because the way her

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[55] Okkyung Lee and Ikue Mori, "Okkyung Lee and Ikue Mori," *Bomb Magazine*, July 15, 2017,
https://bombmagazine.org/articles/okkyung-lee-and-ikue-mori/.

identity and her musical choices interact is complex. She has to combat stigmas attached to being an Asian female. These are obstacles that neither white females nor Asian males have to face. Throughout her musical career she has consistently played groundbreaking, radical, loud, and abrasive music, seemingly as a way to upend these very stereotypes and stigmas. But this image of loud and angry musician is not the only way she wants to be perceived. These become characteristics that, in some ways, trap her and stereotype her in other new ways. She becomes known as a one-dimensional improviser, when in fact she is both an improviser and composer with a wide range of musical expression. In fact, it is through her compositions that her Koreanness can come through. Lee's identity as Korean and female musician are but two strands of the interlocking aspects of her identity that inform her artistry. Her artistic practices as an improviser and composer subvert stereotypes while asserting her multifaceted individuality.

C. Spencer Yeh (1975-)

C. Spencer Yeh is a New York City-based experimental violinist, vocalist and visual artist. His project, Burning Star Core, was a noise/drone project that was influential in underground communities. While he has collaborated with the aforementioned Okkyung Lee, Yeh is less entrenched in the lineage of canonic free improvisors. He is not university or conservatory-trained as a musician, like many in the Downtown New York improvised music scene. In fact, he studied radio, television and film at Northwestern University.[56] In addition to his music practice, Yeh has also made films and has been involved in a DVD restoration project as an art practice. Thus Yeh embodies an intermedia mentality: "I also think the gaps between all

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[56] Wendy F. Hsu, "C. Spencer Yeh," *Grove Music Online*, (Oxford University Press, 2014) accessed April, 30 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2263375.

these practices are being bridged by people who came up on a similarly mixed diet of contexts. I

don't think what I'm doing now is going to seem so odd, eclectic or hard to explain to artists who

are just starting out today."[57] He goes on further to say: "I'm not interested in engaging perfectly

with a particular aesthetic field, whether visual or musical, or even committing to a particular

dialogue within the various perceived categories of music. I've been trying to figure out what

aspect of myself is consistent throughout all the different forms, mediums and genres I use."[58]

Yeh does not let the medium dictate his creativity. Rather, Yeh is primarily concerned with

maintaining his sense of self across different mediums and genres.

The insistence of unity across all mediums in Yeh's work stands in contrast to the

ambiguous nature of his upbringing. In an interview on the 5049 Podcast with Jeremiah

Cymerman, Yeh talks about his upbringing as a Taiwanese-American growing up in rural

Cincinnati. He discusses the elusive sense of unity within his identity in the environment of his

upbringing. Yeh discusses his family wanting to distance themselves from the Asian American

community in order to better assimilate to the dominant culture. He talks about being in an

in-between state that is common of the Asian American immigrant experience. On the one hand,

there is a desire to succeed by disavowing their Asian identity, but on the other hand, this

disavowal leads to racial melancholia. At one point during their discussion on identity and his

upbringing, Yeh says, "It's so difficult to not shake off the feeling that I'm whiny..."[59] This is the

sentiment that as an Asian American, Yeh should not have anything to complain about. Through

propagation of the model minority myth, the dominant culture inhibits us from freely expressing

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[57] C. Spencer Yeh, "In the Studio," interview by Ross Simonini, *Art in America* 104, no. 4 (April 2016): 103.
[58] Yeh, "In the Studio," 99.
[59] C. Spencer Yeh, interview by Jeremiah Cymerman, *The 5049 Podcast with Jeremiah Cymerman*, Podcast audio, November 28, 2016.

the terms of our alienation. In the following chapter, I will explore sentiments like these, concepts of racial melancholia, and the predicament of the minority artist in the underground community in more detail.

CHAPTER 2. Universalism and Melancholia: Intersections of Identity, Artistic Community & Creative Practice

I came across Alex Ross's poetic history of 20th century "classical" music, *The Rest is Noise*, during a formative time of my development as a musician and scholar. I had just completed my undergraduate degree in music performance, and it was right as I was trying to figure out how I could possibly make a sustainable living with music. The book was lauded as "a splendid success, thorough and well researched, eminently readable, with a sense of storytelling hard to find in books of music history."[60] It's a moving account of the most influential, and mostly European composers of 20th century. I sought out the book because at the time, I thought that if I were to pursue the path of the "serious" composer, I needed a better understanding of the kind of legacy that preceded me. While Ross tells an engrossing story, imbuing 20th century music with a vibrancy that is rare in such histories, I could not help but feel like a mere spectator of this story. I felt no connection to the legacy of Mahler or Schoenberg, and the thought of perpetuating this lineage of composers seemed like such a daunting if not utterly unrealistic task.

The sense of detachment that I felt regarding the history of modern classical music is partly a consequence of modernization and the rapidly changing values that come with it. Composers do not have the same impact on society in our era as they once did. In an essay investigating individualism in Western music, musicologist Rose Rosengard Subotnik asks, "What composer of art music who is alive today can be said to have impressed his or her musical individuality on the life of society with anything like the impact of Beethoven or Wagner, or even the aging Haydn in London?"[61] There seems to be a general malaise or fatigue of

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[60] Jan Swafford, "Music Recital," *The Wilson Quarterly (1976-)* 31, no. 4 (2007): 98.
[61] Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 253.

understanding the history of music through a few select "great composers." Yet texts like Ross's

continue to reinforce individualistic ideals: "Ours is no longer an age of world-historical figures,

at least in art music. Yet we continue to define our demands of music in terms of an

individualism more suited to the ethos of an earlier age, with results that circumscribe the

effectiveness of even our most successful composers of art music."[62] Even experimental

composers of the "New York School," including the likes of Morton Feldman and John Cage,

who strove to break free from the individualism of the Western art music tradition by giving

more agency to the performer with the use of graphic notation or strategies of indeterminacy

were successful up to a certain point in demythologizing the role of the composer. George Lewis,

in his essay, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," points

out that members of this New York school, "while critiquing aspects of contemporary European

culture, were explicitly concerned with continuing to develop this 'Western' tradition on the

American continent."[63] Lewis describes the ironic position that composers of this New York

school were mired in. On the one hand, their philosophies and compositions were a radical

departure from the formal constraints of the European classical music tradition, but on the other,

they did little to thwart the perpetuation of individualism that characterizes this tradition. Lewis

is also delineating this Western classical music tradition as one that stems from a Eurological

perspective that often serves to marginalize Afrological perspectives. This racialized relationship

is also apparent in the realm of academia by virtue of the fact that in most institutions,

ethnomusicology exists as a separate discipline from musicology. Subotnik argues that one

reason why music of other cultures continues to be overlooked by contemporary musicology,

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[62] Subotnik, *Developing Variations*, 254.
[63] George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 98.

pushing ethnomusicology into a separate category, is that "many or most of these traditions

embody values about individuals and society that in fact cannot be readily accommodated by the

'great man' theory of history so prevalent in so much American humanistic study even today."

She goes on further to explain:

> "In fact, it seems rather probable that the relative neglect within American musicology of
> music outside the domain of European art bespeaks a general disdain within much of our
> cultural elite for value systems that lie outside the traditional Western aesthetic of
> individualism … the respect for individual difference that has distinguished Western
> cultural values has also led, in terms of Western attitudes toward composition, to an
> undifferentiated rejection of whole systems of cultural values different from our own,
> and to a denigration of individuality within such foreign cultural systems."[64]

Subotnik writes of this paradox in Western art music that manifests when confronted with a

different set of value systems. In other words, the work of the other cannot be recognized in this

canon, and despite the Western attitudes that uphold values of individuality and differentiating

oneself from the "pack," foreign cultural systems that are different from Western cultural values

cannot be recognized as unique and formidable achievements. This attachment to the ideals of

the individual heroic composer serve to exclude other types of creative expression. Lewis argues

that not only have Eurological traditions excluded the "other," they have also co-opted certain

practices, in the case of John Cage's adoption of improvisation as indeterminacy, for example.[65]

The theories developed by Lewis and Subotnik help me contextualize the estrangement

that I feel from the Western art music canon. As an Asian American, it is unclear if the Western

music tradition can fully accommodate someone like me. I do not see myself as extending the

lineage of great classical composers because of the historical invisibility of Asian American

composers. I am also incapable of fully expressing my creativity through the Afrological

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[64] Subotnik, *Developing Variations*, 255.
[65] Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950," 97.

perspective as well. So much about identity politics in the United States is filtered through a binary framework, whether it is Eurological/Afrological or black/white. This struggle to find a home in a musical language in inextricably linked to finding a sense of community. From a very young age, my listening practices have directly informed my sense of self and consequently my sense of community. Deborah Wong writes about the role of listening for Asian Americans: "Asking what music an Asian American listens to is a way to consider how and why Asian Americans make choices about identity, pleasure, and location, not least because very little public culture is Asian American … The uneasy Asian American location between Blackness and Whiteness is right at the center of these matters."[66] Throughout the course of my life, my listening habits have constantly transformed from listening to only Korean popular music as a young child, hip-hop during adolescence, psychedelic rock and roll as a teenager, finally to jazz, which consequently led me to pursue jazz and improvisation studies in college. All of these shifts in my listening habits have significantly shaped my sense of identity and how I interact and identify with other members of my community. With the exception of Korean popular music, all the genres that I mentioned can generally be perceived as rooted in either black or white musical traditions. As a listener and as one who partakes in music making, I have never felt quite at home in this binary framework, being forced to choose between two modes of expressivity, neither of which felt completely authentic to me. This uneasiness is what initially drew me to the world of underground music. It was seemingly a community without a binary framework, spaces where "weirdness" was celebrated, and where modes of expressivity were unclassifiable. I was drawn in by the seductive promise of the universal, but the feeling of not belonging followed me to the underground. This chapter explores this alienation as well as the concept of universalism in the

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[66] Deborah Wong, "Finding an Asian American Audience," *American Music* 19, no. 4 (2001): 367.

face of underground music. It examines the plight of the minority artist working in these fields and the melancholia that can constitute the psychic state of these artists. Using examples from film and literature, I relate the state of invisibility and alienation to my own creative practice.

Simultaneous Openness and Exclusivity in Underground Music

The disconnect that I felt with the history of Western classical music drove me to seek out other communities. The underground music community offers a reprieve from the fairy tale narratives of great European composers. It provides a platform for the far reaches of creativity and is an alternative to the shackles of highly structured institutional settings. Yet the underground community is also fraught with its own set of issues. Despite the promise of artistic freedom, there is an air of exclusivity that lurks and obstacles the minority artist must navigate.

In his essay, "The Paradox of 'Do-It-Yourself' in Unpopular Music," Joseph Borlagdan documents the activity of an underground independent music community in the city of Adelaide in South Australia. Borlagdan uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the field of restricted cultural production to frame the activity of this community. Bourdieu makes the distinction between fields of restricted cultural production and the field of large-scale production. The field of restricted cultural production is encompassed by the larger field but it is also self-contained and retains some level of autonomy. Bourdieu describes the perfectly autonomous field as based on:

> "a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honours and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue)."[67]

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[67] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 39.

These characteristics frame Borlagdan's study of the independent music community in Adelaide. Using Bourdieu's framework in conjunction with interviews of musicians and even active participation in the scene by the author himself, Borlagdan discovers three paradoxical characteristics of music making that arise. The first is creativity through constraint. A great deal of music making that occurs in the scene is characterized by production through limited means, fostering a DIY ethic and a lo-fi aesthetic. The second is independence through interdependence. This refers to the notion of independence that the participants can achieve, but only through some negotiation of social relationships and cultural participation. In other words, some sort of cultural capital must be amassed through the building of relationships with those in the community. The third is that the scene is characterized by a relative autonomy. However autonomous the scene can be, a relationship with the mainstream is inevitable. In his research, Borlagdan finds that some members of this community were able to participate in large-scale commercial productions despite the "social construction of the mainstream as 'other'"[68] that characterizes independent music scenes.

A key characteristic found in this independent music community is an emphasis on artistic integrity devoid of any prospect of monetary gain. In this community, the underground is seemingly a space where artists can be themselves and have complete artistic freedom without the pressure to make a profit. This sentiment is summed up aptly in the following quote from Luke, a participant of the Adelaide underground music scene:

> "I think the reason that everybody is in this sort of little group is making music
> because they really love it and they want to do it just because for that reason
> only and the rest of it doesn't really come into their minds so much. And so you

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[68] Joseph Borlagdan, "The Paradox of 'Do-It-Yourself' in Unpopular Music" in *Philosophical and Cultural Theories of Music*, ed. Eduardo De La Fuente and Peter Murphy (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 194.

sort of question why people are actually making music if one of their objectives seems to be making money from it eventually."[69]

Luke states that his reason for being part of this group comes from a pure love of the music, despite the unlikelihood of commercial or financial success. These attitudes and the ideals embodied by this music community can be seen partly as a reaction to the mainstream, where profitability and art as commodity are most important. This dichotomy between the mainstream and underground is by no means defined by this principle alone. Indeed, Graham views this relationship more as a spectrum.[70] Although a reactionary stance towards the mainstream is not solely what defines the underground, Borlagdan argues that it plays a significant role. He theorizes that participation in this group acts as a challenge to the ubiquitous and becomes an effort to differentiate oneself: "By distancing themselves from the commercialised and co-opted forms of mainstream music, they are able to practise a shared disposition towards music that is socially reproduced around the notion of negation and divergence."[71] These attitudes courageously attempt to negate or diverge from the universal constraints of the mainstream to allow for complete freedom of creative expression. Yet these perspectives, while attempting to build community around the idea of negating the 'music as commodity' paradigm, come with a built-in exclusivity. Within this field of restricted cultural production, this "disinterest in a profit imperative is an important value that is defended and heavily monitored amongst the other producers in the restricted field."[72] Luke questions the intentions of those musicians whose primary objective, or any objective at all, is financial success through music making. As long as

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[69] Borlagdan, "The Paradox of 'Do-It-Yourself,' " 196.
[70] Graham, *Sounds of the Underground*, 9.
[71] Borlagdan, "The Paradox of 'Do-It-Yourself,' " 198.
[72] Ibid., 196.

there exists a pure desire to make art without consideration of monetary gain, one is allowed to participate in independent music communities, but if any other ulterior motives are detected, there is grounds within the community to ostracize them. This kind of idealization of music making assumes financial stability and makes abject any other position. Thus this scene takes on an air of exclusivity where musicians' motives and intentions are constantly being policed.

The example above shows that the core of underground music communities is paradoxical in nature. Luke's quote assumes a hegemonic position even within this supposedly all-inclusive, open-minded underground community. One key aspect missing from Borlagdan's study is the demographic of this community. It is unclear whether there were no minorities present in this community to begin with, or whether he failed to bring up the topic, but this omission is consistent with several other scholarly texts devoted to underground music as I mentioned earlier in the Introduction. There is a lack of diversity within these circles, and the voices of women and people of color are often not heard, further reinforcing the paradox of an all-embracing creative community that often renders minority voices invisible. There is a simultaneous openness and exclusivity that is prevalent in these communities. George Lewis writes, "While popular music studies, including jazz history and criticism, have addressed race matters for quite some time, studies that deal specifically with these issues in the self-described "experimental" musics, including improvised music, are rather few in number, evincing a rather stunted discourse … This general erasure of race seems at variance with experimental music's presumed openness, its emphasis upon resistance, and its excavations of subaltern and marginalized histories of sound."[73] Lewis here is referencing self-described "experimental"

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[73] George E. Lewis, "Gittin' To Know Y'all: Improvised Music, Interculturalism, and the Racial Imagination," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 1, no. 1 (2004), https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v1i1.6.

musics, but his statement is equally applicable to any underground music. The purported

openness and exploratory quality of these musics somehow absolve the lack of diversity in these

circles as well as the lack of conversation to improve the situation. This simultaneous openness

and exclusivity does not necessarily apply to other music communities. Most music traditions

have strictly codified musical systems refined over a long period of time as evidenced by similar

curriculums instated in conservatories and music schools around the country. Underground

musics purportedly know no stylistic boundaries and have historically staunchly opposed the

status quo. Yet these stylistic and philosophical tenets seem at odds with the lack of diversity in

these communities as well as the lack of discussion of these issues. The following section

addresses the cognitive dissonance created by this simultaneous openness and exclusivity, that

affects minority artists involved in the underground music community.

The Margins of Universality: The Predicament of the Underground Minority Artist

In underground music communities, the idea of art as universal is championed yet

minority artists occupy a precarious space in these communities. Theorist David Palumbo-Liu

writes,

> "On the one hand, the realm of artistic creation is held forth as one wherein racial
> and ethnic differentiations are bracketed out. Therefore it is no accident that the
> possibilities for constructing a minority Self as no longer subordinate to, but part
> of, the dominant are sustained most vigorously in the realm of art … By authoring
> a Self, the ethnic subject can supposedly partake of the unity and authority
> thought to be enjoyed by the dominant. The ethnic subject attempts to construct
> a subjectivity unfettered by race and ethnicity and resort to an expression of an
> inherently 'human' subjectivity."[74]

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[74] David Palumbo-Liu, "Universalisms and Minority Culture," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 7,
no. 1 (1995): 188+. *Literature Resource Center* (accessed May 31, 2019).
http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A17716366/LitRC?u=ucirvine&sid=LitRC&xid=4e93dd9f.

So it is in the realm of art that the minority subject has great potential to undo the socially

imposed hierarchies based on race. In a culture constructed around ideals of freely expressive

music, as in the case of the Adelaide underground music community, all are supposedly welcome

to create and take part in this community. In the name of pure artistic creation, expression of

"human" qualities are prioritized. Yet there are inherent limitations imposed on the minority

artist.

> "The struggle for the minority subject (… the 'ethnic artist') is thus to transgress
> the limits that the dominant culture places upon him/her. She asks that the
> promise of universal art to accommodate her be kept. The ethnic artist aspires to
> join the dominant's universal culture, to slough off 'ethnic' and solely identify as
> 'artist,' yet at specific historical moments the ethnic 'text' evinces a suspicion of
> the universal that belies its all-inclusive claims and displays its particular modes
> of interpellating the ethnic."[75]

While the underground is meant to be a space to escape one kind of universality that the

mainstream and commercialism represent, the ethnic artist working in this field is confronted

with the challenge of navigating the promise of universality that art in general provides. As

Palumbo-Liu points out, on the one hand, the ethnic artist expects to be solely identified as an

artist, yet it is because of the promise of universality of artistic creation that is *presumed* to exist,

that positions minorities in a disadvantaged state. Because the promise of universal art is

presumed to exist for all (but is not necessarily the case), minority artists may not be in a position

to demand that this promise be kept. This manifests, for example, in C. Spencer Yeh's sentiment

of not wanting to sound "whiny" when it comes to issues of identity, as mentioned in Chapter 1.

In other words, minority artists are denied access to the dominant's universal culture because

there is a presumption that they already partake in this culture. This presumption stems from the

aspiration for the universal, where the dominant culture denies that the concept of "dominant"

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[75] Palumbo-Liu, "Universalisms and Minority Culture."

even exists in this realm. This is the kind of colorblind attitude that renders ethnicity and

difference invisible. So minority artists are thought to exist and thrive in this field just as much as

their white counterparts, when in reality, their alienation remains very much intact.

The minority artist trying to assert themself in an underground community starts from a

disadvantaged position. In the introduction to *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American*

Writers,[76] editors Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong write,

> "The subject matter of minority literature is social history, not necessarily by design but
> by definition … The white writer can get away with writing for himself, knowing full
> well he lives in a world run by people like himself. At some point the minority writer is
> asked for who he is writing, and in answering that question must decide who he is."[77]

The ethnic artist is not automatically afforded the freedom to express themself unfettered by

artistic constraints. The editors of *Aiiieeeee!* acknowledge that the work (in this case, specifically

literature) of minority artists must necessarily include social history. The white writer does not

need to take this step. If the subject matter of work by the ethnic artist is not social history, then

the extra step that the ethnic artist must take in order to join the universal is to renounce their

"ethnic" identity, as Palumbo-Liu writes. Every stroke, every movement, every note played

comes with a kind of baggage. Minority subjectivities are always formed in relation to the

dominant or universal position. There is a sense of lack that is already internalized by the

minority subject because in order to take part in the universal promise of art, they must first

"slough off" their ethnic identity, making it impossible to construct a subjectivity at equal

footing with the dominant.

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[76] An anthology from 1975 of work by Asian American writers that was out of print at the time.
[77] Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong as cited by Ishizuka, *Serve The People*,
163.

Thus the minority artist is presented with two extreme modalities of navigating the art space. The first is that they should give up a part of themselves in order to be taken seriously as an artist. Issues of identity in their work should be backgrounded as much as possible so as to blend in with the dominant culture. The second is to foreground one's identity as a minority so that it is the sole reason that gives the work any meaning. As cultural critic, Margo Machida points out, some members of the Asian American arts community of the 1990s questioned whether their movement in fact "delimited discourse and forced artists and their work into racialized or ideologically driven straitjackets."[78]

The first modality of relinquishing one's identity, can be understood in the context of Asian American history. The notion of self-loathing and needing to suppress one's Asian identity originated earlier in our country's history as a means for self preservation. Particularly poignant is a concept that author and activist Karen Ishizuka refers to as "Asian aversion":

> "We have been so schooled in the idea that 'white is right' that, in direct contrast to the 'black nod' - the nonverbal tilt-of-the-head acknowledgement of one black person to another that signals community membership, that 'we're all in this together' - during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Sanseis unconsciously employed what can be called the 'Asian aversion,' the unconscious practice of averting our gaze when encountering another Asian in public. It was a knee-jerk reaction, something we were never taught or understood, but did. Like waking up in the morning and seeing some Chinese man in the mirror, it seems as if we were so uncomfortable when confronted with our own likeness that we automatically looked away in self-conscious embarrassment."[79]

This "Asian aversion" that Ishikawa describes is an all too familiar sentiment that I have experienced and perhaps subconsciously participate in. It is not as charged of an instinct as it was in the 1950s and 1960s as Ishizuka describes, and it does not necessarily occur in everyday situations as it perhaps once did, but it manifests itself in a modern way, especially in arts

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[78] Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 37.
[79] Ishizuka, *Serve The People*, 39-40.

communities. I experienced this being the only or one of very few Asian Americans in socio-musical settings. This position was highly peculiar and paradoxical as I felt prideful in being different but recognizing that this difference had nothing directly to do with my artistry but was something that I had absolutely no control over. So in these contexts, I felt a strong sense of alienation simultaneously coupled with a desire to stand out amongst my peers. Oftentimes, approaching another Asian American would trigger resentment and would be an exercise in avoidance. This can be perhaps seen as a manifestation of the internalization of self-hate, but it can also be seen as an act of self-preservation. If I am the only Asian American in a socio-musical setting, I am able to occupy the unique space of standing out because of my obvious difference while also making my identity as an Asian American invisible. When there is more than one Asian American present, counterintuitively, there is no solidarity in numbers because it prevents us from blending in. Asian American studies scholar, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong writes, "In a racist world, perhaps the only imaginable self-love is the one measured through the mirror of the dominant group."[80] Thus the "Asian aversion" instinct is triggered, perhaps because of the illusion that self-love is only achieved through the lens of the dominant group. It perpetuates the notion of whiteness being a necessary condition to participate in certain cultural settings, in this case the underground music scene. This instinct comes from a place of hurt and alienation, and can be explored through the concept of racial melancholia.

Melancholia, Invisibility, and Creative Practice

Asian American, a term originally coined to combat the negative and racist undertones of the term "oriental," brought together the various sub-groups of immigrants of Asian descent in a

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[80] Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, "What Was Asian American Cinema?" *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 3 (2017): 131.

political effort to combat racial injustice.[81] It was a galvanizing effort to build community within these sub-groups. Yet despite it being more of a political label rather than a racial one, there is a paradox inherent to the term: "to identify one's self as Asian American is to both accept and critique the externally imposed label which denies the specificity of one's cultural heritage and defines one's otherness in racial terms … To claim a hyphenate identity is to assert a subject position while simultaneously asserting the impossibility of stable positioning."[82] Filmmaker Wayne Wang develops this idea of a multi-faceted and unstable Asian American identity in his film *Chan Is Missing* (1981). In the discourse of Asian American film studies, *Chan Is Missing*, is commonly accepted as a pioneering film that paved the way for the genre of Asian American film and video.[83] In the film, Wayne Wang explores Chinese American identity and "foregrounds the heterogeneity of Chinese American subjectivities, thereby arguing for the fluidity of Chinese American identity."[84] The film is a pseudo-detective film noir that follows two protagonists in their search for a man named Chan Hung who absconded with a large sum of money. Their journey leads them to sources with wildly differing accounts of Chan. In the end, their money is retrieved, but Chan himself is ultimately nowhere to be found. The different accounts of Chan's identity signal the fluidity of Chinese American identity. Furthermore, the film "suggests the contingency of Chinese American subjectivities … and in so doing paves the way for Asian American subjectivities that might learn from Chinese American heterogeneity."[85] Chan Hung is representative of an Asian American identity that is constantly in-formation. There are constant

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[81] Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 282-283.

[82] Peter Feng, "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: 'Chan Is Missing,' " *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 4 (1996): 93.

[83] Jun Okada, " 'Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell': Asian American Film and Video, 1971-1982," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (2009): 20.

[84] Feng, "Being Chinese American," 91.

[85] Ibid.

negotiations taking place between the two cultures. Thus there is no singular way to express Asian American identity. While Chan is a symbol of a continuously developing multifarious identity, it is significant that Chan is ultimately nowhere to be found by the end of Wang's film. This makes us wonder whether or not Chan actually exists or if there is even a place in the world for an identity that is constantly in-formation. The choice to never reveal Chan's existence could mean that his existence is in fact not real or is rendered invisible. So while Chan's identity is constantly in flux and a site of collaboration, it is also a site of abjection. Chan's identity as an Asian American is essentially invisibile.

Melancholia is at the root of this invisibility. This invisibility is the result of the loss of self, which interdisciplinary scholar, Anne Anlin Cheng describes as part of the process of melancholia. Cheng uses the concept of melancholia as a psychological framework, taking Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia as a starting point. In his work, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud describes mourning as a finite process, where one is able to move on from a loss and purge it completely. He describes melancholia as being unable to move past mourning but rather internalizing the loss: "the melancholic is so persistent and excessive in the remembrance of loss that *that* remembrance becomes part of the self."[86] Identities are formed from a recognition of fundamental difference. Thus the loss that occurs in melancholia is the *self*, and identities are formed based on "the incorporation as self of an excluded other."[87] Cheng uses the 1961 Hollywood film, *Flower Drum Song*, to demonstrate the immigrant, whose status is "illegal," striving to become a model citizen. Paradoxically, in order to survive, the protagonist who is already breaking the law by being in this country illegally must strive to become the ideal

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[86] Anne Anlin Cheng, "The Melancholy of Race," *The Kenyon Review,* New Series 19, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 50.
[87] Ibid.

citizen. Towards the end of the film, the protagonist's illegal status is the very factor that frees

her from an arranged marriage and leads her to become naturalized. Thus Cheng writes of this

scenario "where one acquires citizenship in a rhetoric of rebirth predicated on self-renunciation."

[88] This is an example in popular media where the "other" is required to renounce her identity to

achieve happiness and to become assimilated.

Furthermore, Cheng considers Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a peculiar text because

the protagonist does not arrive at some heroic sense of identity. It goes against the notion that

such a work should empower disenfranchised communities through a character that is able to

come out of the shadows with a strong, clear identity. Rather, Cheng argues that the political

platform of *Invisible Man* relies on "the nonexistence of identity, on invisibility with its

assimilative and dissimulative possibilities."[89] The ambiguity and uneasiness of this position is

what allows for interrogation of the status quo and to challenge the discourse around identity

politics. Asian American artists working on the fringe also aim to occupy this space. Asian

American youth growing up in America witness very little representation of Asian Americanness

in popular media. So they have had to constantly internalize the loss of self, the very process of

melancholia. Cheng writes that "minority discourse might prove to be most powerful when it

resides within the consciousness of melancholia itself, when it can maintain a "negative

capability" between neither dismissing, nor sentimentalizing the minority."[90] This negative

capability is what I am striving for in the creative portion of the dissertation. I am attempting to

undo the integration of the lost self as the other into my identity. The creative project becomes an

attempt to retrieve the lost self that is the result of the melancholic state. It is uncertain if this

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[88] Cheng, "The Melancholy of Race," 52.
[89] Ibid., 60.
[90] Ibid.

retrieval is even possible, but my goal is not to sentimentalize this process. More powerful than incorporating obvious signifiers of my Korean heritage (through Korean traditional music, for example) would be to position my work in a space where sound, visuals, movement and language are abstracted and allowed to implicitly convey the intricacies of the consciousness of melancholia. And in order to do this, it is important to make my work distinctly Asian American. But is this even possible? What makes a work undeniably Asian American? The very nature of being Asian American is so unstable and ambiguous. To a certain extent, Asian American histories must be invented. As George Lewis writes, "the destruction of family and lineage, the rewriting of history and memory in the image of whiteness, is one of the facts with which all people of color must live."[91] In *Chan is Missing*, characters are able to reinvent their own histories by projecting their own images onto Chan, making this figure quintessentially Asian American. In my creative project, I do something similar. I invent a creative language that is distinctly Asian American. While there is the obvious option to draw from my Korean heritage by adopting Korean folk songs for example, I cannot say that I am very connected to this music. Having been raised in Queens, New York, my upbringing was distinctly Korean American and rooted in the panethnicity of Asian America. Since this designation is still relatively new and encompasses such a diverse array of ethnic backgrounds, music that is distinctly Asian American is hard to describe. Operating within underground artistic communities, working across different mediums, and stressing the use of melodies, all inform my search for what is Asian American.

Thus my creative process is rooted in imagining what is Asian American and working through the melancholic state that affects minority artists. Scholar, John Lechte speaks of melancholia, not as merely a depressive state but as a fundamental condition of being an artist:

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[91] Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950," 109.

"It is not inevitable, however, that the art deriving from a melancholic disposition has a melancholic content, or subject matter. For the issue is not centred on … a melancholic or depressing story. Rather, it is a question of being able to be an artist at all, a question of coming into the realm of the symbolic and developing our imaginary capacities and thereby producing a language for - and thus against - our sadness."[92]

The question of melancholia, as Lechte mentions, is an ongoing one that artists must grapple with, and it does not necessarily lead to work that is inherently melancholic or sad. My creative work, emphasizing melody and relying on the fruits of collaboration, is the development of a creative language that addresses melancholia. As my creative project moves from the state of a homemade album to a performance in front of an audience, I am attempting to transmute my creativity on an individual and private level into a social process, as I will discuss further in detail in the following chapter. The creative activity explored in this dissertation is a mechanism for survival. My project is the process of creating melodies that only come to life when they come into contact with others, whether they are my bandmates, label manager, or audience members. My sociality is structured around music and music communities, and my sociality is directly linked to my livelihood. In her essay, "Poetry Is Not A Luxury," Audre Lorde writes,

"The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are - until the poem - nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt."[93]

In some ways, this dissertation, the creative research in conjunction with the theoretical research, shares many similar qualities with therapeutic work, especially in the search for self-healing. This project has essentially become a search for self-love that is not shrouded by the shadow of

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[92] John Lechte, "Art, Love, and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva," in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990), 38.
[93] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 36.

the dominant culture. It is the process of shifting this light, that Lorde mentions, with which we scrutinize our lives. Through poetry, and in my case an intermedia performance project, I can illuminate the complex, troubled, and inspiring parts of my being and carry out an honest examination of my relationships between my identity as an Asian American, my creative persona and the communities that I participate in.

CHAPTER 3. *rotunda*—Melodies of a *Sub*-Subculture: Explorations of Asian American Identity through Creative Practice

Project Overview

In the previous chapter, I proposed two extreme modalities that Asian American artists are confronted with. They were first, to shrink one's identity in an attempt to blend in with the dominant culture or second, to solely focus on issues of identity. In other words, the first requires one to only address aesthetic concerns while backgrounding one's identity as much as possible, while the second allows little room for aesthetic considerations since one's identity is so front and center in the work. Both are undesirable options. David Palumbo-Liu offers a nuanced alternative to these modalities. He makes a distinction between " 'reactive' cultural production that emphatically announces its antagonism toward the dominant" and "more vexed, ambivalent modes of constructing cultural texts that exhibit both an allegiance to the notion of the universal and an uncomfortable sense of disenfranchisement from that ideal structure."[94] The first is closely related to activism through art, while the second offers a more ambivalent approach. My work strives to fit into the latter category. I cannot claim to be activist in the traditional sense through my work. It does not have lyrics or titles that express political beliefs. Rather, there is a quality that engages with the notion of the universal while maintaining suspicion of it. For me, this ambivalence is expressed through work that invokes a lo-fi aesthetic and is purposefully imperfect, non-virtuosic, oftentimes simple, and consequently oftentimes whimsical. This is the way I navigate the promise of the universal that the underground offers while simultaneously expressing my suspicion of this promise. In this way, to be Asian American is to constantly be in-between, and it is also important that my work consistently occupy this space as well.

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[94] Palumbo-Liu, "Universalisms and Minority Culture."

The creative project entitled, *rotunda*, is an experimental intermedia performance project bringing together sonic and visual elements to create an intimate and personal experience. This is a project that is built on minimal sounds and gestures with a lo-fi aesthetic as a reaction to a culture obsessed with spectacle and cutting edge technology. *rotunda* is less of a finished product and more of a snapshot of my ongoing creative process in the context of underground music communities. This snapshot documents the transformation of my project from an individual endeavor to one that is very public and collaborative. It features composed music that integrates improvisation for musicians. It also includes hand-drawn animations and abstract moving and still images displayed on analog television sets, as well as a collaboration with a performance artist. The project tries to refrain from traditional models of a live soundtrack accompanying visual content and instead strives towards *intermedia*, where different media are in fluid dialogue with each other and equal importance is given to both sonic and visual materials. The element of collaboration is key to this work and a central aspect of the dissertation is the documentation of the collaborative process between the performers.

The project is also a return to *melody*. Over the past few years, I have both consciously and subconsciously strayed away from the traditional notion of melody in my work. I found myself abandoning certain aspects of my music that once spoke so powerfully to me. On a surface level, the abandonment of melody and my predilection for abstraction could be seen as the natural evolution of my musicality. In fact, it is not uncommon for any practitioner of the arts to become interested in increasingly complex concepts and techniques as they spend more time time in the field. But I want to challenge this notion of equating progress for a musician to a heightened ability to implement complex musical ideas in their work. Over the recent few years,

the artistic decision to stray away from melody and other similar decisions I had adopted, especially during my time in academia, were influenced by an institutional push towards complexity. They have been strongly influenced by "high art" aspirations and attempts to gain recognition in the sphere of music academia. During this time spent in academia, I would often have trouble reconciling the disparity of the music I was composing to the music I would listen to in my own leisure time. I have come to suspect that this disavowal of what truly inspired me in music, was a personification of the melancholia that I described in the previous chapter. So while there may be some truth in this disavowal simply being a natural evolution of my musical taste, I ultimately came to realize that this has, in fact, been a way to make myself more palatable to the dominant culture, and paradoxically, a way to also resist the invisibility that I experience in so many socio-musical settings. By doing so, I have become increasingly alien to myself. Through this project, I attempt to reclaim some of those features of my work that I have abandoned along the way, especially melody. Sounding the melodies of the *sub*-subculture that is the Asian American underground is an attempt to undo the subconscious decisions I have made to conform to the hegemony of mainstream and institutional systems, all the while, dealing with the paradoxical nature of the underground community itself.

In this chapter, I will discuss the technological considerations of *rotunda* and analyze my work as a vehicle for the exploration of Asian American identity. I will expound on the creative process of my work, including the two phases that structure the work as it shifts from an individual endeavor to a collective one. It will examine the creative and aesthetic choices made in my work as they relate to my own identity and consider the DIY, lo-fi and intermedial qualities that characterize my work.

Two Phases

The project has two phases. The first is the production of an album. The production of

this album is an individual endeavor. I use my own recording equipment and my own

instruments to create the album, thus being completely self-reliant. I made a deliberate decision

to rely on my own means and to avoid using any institutional resources during this phase because

this process is in line with the typical creative process of those working in underground music

communities. I am also attempting to make the most out of limited means so as to say that what I

have is good enough. My work can stand on its own. In the same way, my identity as an Asian

American should not have to be defined by the dominant culture. Symbolically, my work and the

creative process become tools to push back on harmful labels like "model minority" that

perpetuate stereotypes and define Asian American-ness only in relation to whiteness. Thus the

recording of this album was done on my own terms with the tools and space that I had access to.

The solitary practice of composing, recording and mixing in the confines of my bedroom is also

fitting with the introspective quality of my research on Asian American identity. This phase of

the creative process is research that is directed inward.

In the second phase, this inward exploration was transmuted into a form that was in

dialogue with the public. This started with performing the material of the album in concerts as a

solo act. The performances acted as workshops where the album material was showcased, then

tweaked and reworked based on feedback from the audience and my own personal feedback

from the experience of performing this music. The next step of this phase was to find a way to

release the album. I decided that the album would be released on a small independent label as a

cassette tape. This then culminated in an album release event which was the focal point of this

dissertation. This performance enlisted the services of several performers active in underground music communities of Los Angeles. The material of the album was orchestrated for a band of musicians that included a drummer, a singer and two synthesizer players. Thus part of the research is an exploration of the translation process, from individual to collective, as well as the collaborative process. The translation process was a delicate one, but the album release performance was not meant to sound exactly like original album. There were changes made and even brand new pieces added. The album release event also included a screening of my hand-drawn animations shown on television sets, as well as a performance piece. Through this process of creating a home studio album and reimagining it for a collective group of performers, the project served as an exploration of the spectrum that spanned the individual to the collective, I found that this process was also related to the collaborative and malleable nature of Asian American identity. Like the nature of Asian American identity, this project too is essentially an open-ended exploration. This dissertation is merely the documentation of a tiny sliver of what is a lifelong creative endeavor.

Phase 1—Overview

The album consists of a series of musical vignettes that are strung together to create one whole entity. The sonic material consists of mostly synthesized sounds. The instruments used were the Roland Juno-60, Yamaha DX7, accordion, and software synthesizers. I also utilize field recordings that I had made myself. The qualities that I try to foreground in this work are simplicity and melody. This is in direct contrast to the qualities that musicologist Stephen Graham attributes to most underground music: "abrasive, coarse, noisy, abstruse, ambitious,

impenetrable … dense and extended formal strategies, an absence of pulse or the use of aperiodic rhythms, chromatic modal or polytonal structures, spectral attention to sonority and tone, reliance on improvisation as strategic determinant, droning reductions of pulse and motion to near-stasis."[95] My work provides an antithesis to many of these qualities. There are periodic rhythms, the harmonic structures are mostly tonal and while there are some drone-like qualities to the work, it does not stay in a static state for long. Some of the melodies are improvised and some are composed. It is important to me that my melodies have a childlike and amateur quality about them. I consciously avoid any display of technical virtuosity. The music on this album owes a heavy debt to the work of Aki Tsuyuko, whose music was a major influence for this album. Tsuyuko is a composer, vocalist, keyboardist and electronic musician based in Japan. Her music is described, "as small musical sculptures, turning slowly in place without really going anywhere."[96] While clearly highly trained as a keyboardist, Tsuyuko opts for simpler harmonic and rhythmic progressions. Her music uses simple melodies, and her singing voice evokes a kind of poignant naivety associated with childhood. Mark Richardson, of Pitchfork, puts it best, that Tsuyuko "exhibits a patience and restraint that elevates the seemingly simple music to something more profound."[97] The music on *rotunda* extends from this aesthetic quality of works by musicians like Tsuyuko, using synthesized sounds and simple gestures, to evoke what is simultaneously poignant and buoyant.

It is possible that this idea of avoidance of virtuosity can be met with some amount of resistance in the realm of academia, especially within the realms of composition and technology.

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[95] Stephen Graham, "(Un)Popular Avant-Gardes: Underground Popular Music and the Avant-Garde," *Perspectives of New Music* 48, no. 2 (2010): 10.
[96] Mark Richardson, "Aki Tsuyuko—*Hokane*," accessed April 30, 2019, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/8320-hokane/.
[97] Ibid.

Part of my work is insisting that my creativity, which is defiantly non-complex, can belong here as well. Within academia, and especially in realms of technology and composition, two historically white and male dominated fields, there are expectations that creative work should be technologically extraordinary or aesthetically complex. These expectations, at times explicit and at times implicit, may even serve to exclude minorities. bell hooks writes, "work by women of color and marginalized groups … especially if written in a manner that renders it accessible to a broad reading public, is often de-legitimized in academic settings."[98] bell hooks is writing primarily in the context of feminist theory, yet her ideas ring just as loud in music contexts. As a marginalized identity, attempting to create simple, non-virtuosic work, I also faced a certain amount of resistance in academic settings and found that I had to fully justify my predilection for my aesthetic. hooks goes on further to write that those in power use theory "to set up unnecessary and competing hierarchies of thought which reinscribe the politics of domination by designating work as either inferior, superior, or more or less worthy or attention."[99] Detailed exploration of these complex power dynamics within academia are out of the scope of this dissertation, but these concerns shape the way I navigate this realm. Through my creative work, I aim to question the value of virtuosity in these contexts. Ultimately, this project is not meant to be a subversive act. Rather it is an attempt to express myself truthfully through creative practice, but it is possible that the mere act of being myself becomes subversive anyway.

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[98] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 63-64.
[99] Ibid., 64.

A Tape Release and the Lo-fi Aesthetic

      The discourse around the lo-fi aesthetic is an expansive topic suitable for its own

dissertation. Although my work is not necessarily defined by the lo-fi aesthetic, it is tangentially

inspired by it. And since it is a common aesthetic associated with underground music

communities, I will briefly delve into some of the current scholarship surrounding the term.

Lo-fi, according to the New Grove Dictionary, is an aesthetic strategy that employs technologies

that are outdated and below the standard mainstream quality and often conveys "a sense of

intimacy, authenticity, and candor."[100] Adam Harper, who has written a dissertation on lo-fi

aesthetics within popular music discourse, also views the term lo-fi not as a specific genre

delineation, but as a way to understand a particular type of music. Harper writes that "lo-fi as it is

normally understood is less a genre or mode of music-making than a confluence, in the reception

of certain recordings, of various aesthetic currents that run through the late-twentieth and early

twenty-first century - known under further headings such as primitivism, realism, postmodernism

and archaism."[101] He also writes that the lo-fi aesthetic can be seen "as a positive appreciation of

what are perceived and/or considered normatively interpreted as imperfections in a recording,

with particular emphasis on imperfections in the recording technology itself."[102] Following the

thread of imperfect audio quality, my plan was to release the album on cassette tape. The origins

of cassette culture go back to the underground music culture of the 1980s and 1990s where tapes

were networked through magazines and distributed via postal mail.[103] The cassette tape as a

medium remains a signifier of the underground and has made somewhat of a resurgence in recent

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[100] Mickey Vallee, "Lo-fi," *Grove Music Online*, (Oxford University Press, 2014) accessed April, 30 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2267083.

[101] Adam Harper, "Lo-Fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse," (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2014), 5.

[102] Ibid., 6

[103] Ibid., 141.

times. For me, the medium represents a certain nostalgia not only for my childhood, but also for

a more recent past where owning a record, tape, or CD (music on a physical medium, as opposed

to the current trend of online streaming) was the norm.

For *rotunda*, I created original album art, see figures 3.1 and 3.2 below. It was important

for me to have control over the sonic as well as the visual aspects for this project. Because I lack

formal training in the visual arts, these hand-drawn figures have an amateurish yet personal

quality to them. This amateurish and doodle-like quality of this work is consistent with the sonic

material in its avoidance of virtuosity. This aesthetic is also consistent in my video piece, which I

will describe in detail later.

Figure 3.1 Album art, front

borey shin
"rotunda"

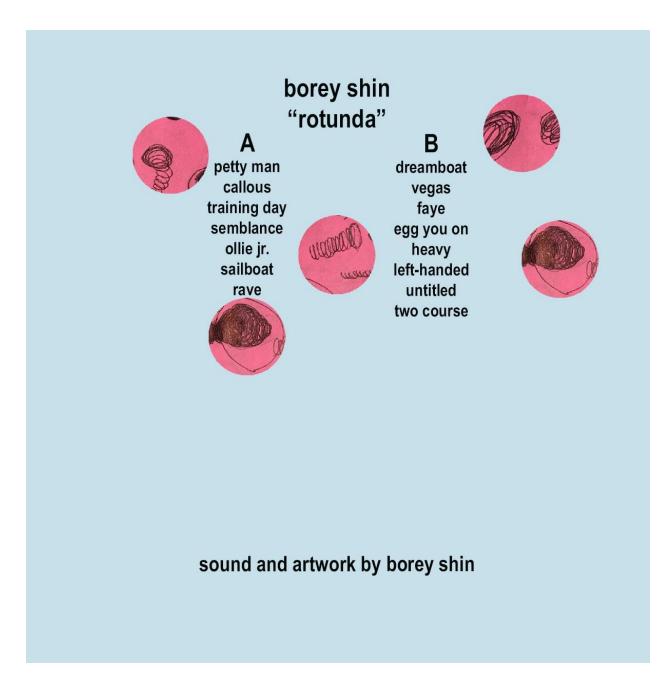| A	B
petty man	dreamboat
callous	vegas
training day	faye
semblance	egg you on
ollie jr.	heavy
sailboat	left-handed
rave	untitled
	two course

sound and artwork by borey shin

Figure 3.2 Album art, back

***rotunda*—As Album**[104]

The album starts with a composition entitled "petty man." This tune is based off of a

simple ostinato figure, revolving around a pedal point G, with alternating bass notes of C and B.

The timbre chosen for this bassline is deliberately devoid of expressivity. In other words, it

doesn't have the tonal richness or overtone complexity of an acoustic instrument, nor does it try

to imitate one. There is no release at the end of the note, meaning that the notes are cut off and

not allowed to ring and decay. The rhythm is simple and non-syncopated and in even 4/4 time.

The timbre and rhythm imbue this piece with a playful, almost flippant quality. This ostinato

figure stays consistent throughout the piece, while three separate melodies are played over it.

Each melody dictates the tonal quality of the ostinato. For example, the first melody is centered

around the notes B and G. Played over the ostinato of C, B and G, this collection of the pitches

gives the impression of being in C major. The second melody outlines a B major triad, creating a

polytonal harmonic structure with the ostinato. The third melody implies an A minor tonality

with the introduction of the G#. There is an element of humor and lightheartedness to this piece

that is central to my approach to music making and sets the tone for the rest of the album.

In "callous," there is no distinct, discernable melody. It is a series of chords played in

broken, disjunct rhythmic phrases. If the basic rhythmic unit is the eighth note, the whole piece is

constructed of alternating groups of one, two or three eighth notes, without any regularly

repeating patterns. This progression of chords make up the entire sonic world of this piece. I

originally intended for this piece to have a melody or some other timbral aspect, but it was

difficult to pair this with anything else. The focus then became the unexpected shifts of harmony,

the unstable rhythmic patterns paired with the sound of the digital piano, altered to give it a more

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[104] The link to stream the album can be found here: https://friendshiptapes.bandcamp.com/album/rotunda.

human feel (by cutting high frequencies and making the pitch slightly unstable). I also play with expectations of the listener that perhaps expects to hear another element added to this piece, but instead it continues with this progression without any added elements. The story of this piece is the harmonic progression, how each chord responds to the previous one, invoking a call and response structure, albeit a loose one.

"left-handed" was the last piece composed for this album. This piece is unique because it was composed in the later stages when I had decided on the final instrumentation for my group. Compositions created up until this point were mainly made to exist in recorded format, not necessarily as a live performance. The way "left-handed" was conceived was different because throughout the composition process, arrangement ideas for the ensemble were constantly in the back of my mind. This led to including electronic percussion, albeit in a very minimal way, to this piece. A "4 on the floor" kick drum enters around two-thirds of the way throughout the piece. This piece can be seen as the link from the recorded material of this album to the reimagining of the same material in live performance.

"two course" is the final song of the album. It starts with a recording I made of my grandmother speaking in Korean, followed by a sparse piano improvisation. This is one of the very few instances throughout the album of a recording of an acoustic instrument. It is also the only instance of the human voice on the whole album. It is interesting that the timbre of the human voice is perhaps the most complex sound, in terms of overtone construction, that appears throughout the whole album. Despite being a mere twenty seconds of audio, this recording of my grandmother's voice holds a good deal of weight as it reminds me of the poignancy of the human voice. This emotional impact is perhaps emphasized by the way it emerges as a completely

different sound from the cloud of electronic sounds that preceded it. In a sense, I have created an

environment where the sound of the human voice might be perceived as alien. The alien quality

comes from not only the radical shift in sound quality but also through the content of my

grandmother's speech as perceived by those that don't understand the Korean language. This is a

significant moment as the only obvious marker of my Asian identity on the whole album, and

one that I've intentionally included as a "coded" sound. Clarissa Grace Chang uses the term

codification to describe a method of decolonial resistance in artmaking:

> "Creating coded images like this can provide a degree of protection from the epistemic
> violence of the white gaze while using methods that allow image creators to focus on
> their target audience(s) without having to do even more work do not require a privileging
> of the white gaze. This method acknowledges the impossibility of escaping the white
> gaze but allows for protective methods that do not accidentally privilege it."[105]

Chang argues that the process of codification is to create coded images to privilege certain

audiences. They acknowledge that it is impossible to escape the white gaze entirely, but that

artists may use the insertion of coded images in their work as a way to communicate with other

marginalized identities in an effort to center their gaze. While Chang's focus here is on visual

coded images, the theory can be applicable to sound. The use of the recording of my

grandmother speaking in Korean is not to be exclusionary, but rather it is a way to build

solidarity in the face of the white gaze. Using coded sounds helps cultivate the relationship

between individual identity and a sense of community.

Since I have centered my dissertation topic on issues of identity, throughout this process,

I have been faced with the expectation to have Asian American markers in my work. With the

exception of the above example, there is an absence of any Asian American markers in the

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[105] Clarissa Grace Chang, "Imagining Somewheres: Obstruction as a Productive Force in Decolonial Visuality, Solidarities, and Asian American Futures," (Master's thesis, Lund University, 2018), 1.

album. My insistence on recognition as an Asian American underground musician does not require my work to contain Asian or Asian American signifiers. This expectation might be based on the assumption that there is a specific "Asian American" sound that exists, when in reality it does not. The underground is meant to be an outlet for resistance, but it is not necessarily the case for minority artists. Without equal representation in this field, it is difficult to assert myself, without tokenizing myself. This project aims to occupy the aforementioned "in-between" quality of Asian American-ness by being in dialogue with underground music but differentiating itself from typical qualities that are associated with the underground.

Phase II—Collaboration and Intermedia

Because this work is situated in the underground music community, which is a transnational one, as mentioned previously in the Introduction, and since it is also centered around the collaborative nature of Asian American identity, this project considers collaboration on several different levels. This phase of the creative work is the negotiation of ideas not only between fellow musicians, but venue managers, record label managers, audience, and community members as well. The idea of creative practice as inextricably linked to social practice is central to this project. In the following section, I will detail both the musical and the collaborative aspects of this creative process and ways in which they are entangled with Asian American participation in the underground.

Phase II continues with the album release process. I decided to release my music through *friendshiptapes*, an underground, independent tape label managed by Andy Allen, a saxophonist/electronic musician/composer/educator based in Western Massachusetts. Andy is a

close friend of mine, and former collaborator during my time spent in the underground music community in Boston, where I lived on and off from 2009 to 2015. His label is run primarily through the website, bandcamp.com, a platform allowing artists to upload their music and independently manage sales and distribution, and as mentioned in a New York Times article, "one of the greatest underground-culture bazaars of our time."[106] In my experience, releases in the underground community are frequently distributed through bandcamp. I had considered managing the distribution and the dubbing of tapes myself, but I ultimately decided to reach out to Andy, partly as a way to maintain connections with my former community. This also allowed me to focus on composing the music and creating original album art. Interestingly but not surprisingly, I became one of only a couple, if not the only person of color, and most likely the only Asian American musician to have had music released by this label thus far. This is representative of the demographics of the underground music community in Massachusetts, where I first experienced the simultaneous openness and exclusivity that I elaborated on in Chapter 2. So the collaboration with *friendshiptapes* brings up conflicting, ambivalent emotions. On the one hand, it is a joyful way to reconnect with old colleagues. On the other hand, it is a return to a place where I had experienced alienation on an invisible level. I was very close and I remain close with some of the members of this mostly-white community of musicians, but feelings of alienation were very much my own during the time spent in this community because I had difficulty sharing the terms of this alienation with those who did not share them as well. But these emotions are also related to the feelings I described in the previous chapter about "Asian aversion" and taking a certain pride in being different. Ultimately, I felt that bringing my music

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[106] Ben Ratliff, "Is Bandcamp the Holy Grail of Online Record Stores?" *The New York Times*, August 19, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/20/arts/music/bandcamp-shopping-for-music.html.

to *friendshiptapes* was a positive collaboration because at the very least, it was one small step towards diversifying their discography.

Another instance of collaboration was reaching out to my local community in Los Angeles to secure a venue for the album release concert. I reached out to a number of venues, including Human Resources, Art Share LA, and Automata, but I was either met with no response or an asking price to rent the space that was too high. I continued contacting various members of the Los Angeles underground music community about alternative venues, and eventually learned about The Mortuary, a new DIY performance space located in Lincoln Heights, Los Angeles that opened in August 2018. Unlike the other spaces I reached out to, they did not charge a fee to use the space, and they were welcoming and open to having dialogue about my artistic practice and why I wanted to present work at their space. The Mortuary's website describes their space as "home to unclassifiable experiences, unusual collaborations, and underserved voices. We build community and incubate new performance centered around intimate exchange. We create context for liminal, hybrid, chimeric and otherwise uncontainable practices to realize themselves by doing."[107] The artistic director of the venue, Scarlett Kim, a Korean experimental theater director, is committed to showcasing work of "underserved voices." Scarlett was instrumental in bringing the performance to fruition and encouraged me throughout the process to push the boundaries of what an album release show could be. She gave me the freedom to present my work in a kind of "studio visit" setting, as opposed to having the pressure to present a fully polished product. This idea was poignant for me and represented the ethos of Asian American identity as collaboration.

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[107] "The Mortuary," The Mortuary, accessed April 30, 2019, https://www.themortuaryla.com/.

rotunda—As Album Release Performance[108]

The culmination of this project was the album release performance which took place

Sunday, May 19, 2019 at The Mortuary. Normally, an album release show only features the

music of the album that is to be released. For this performance, I wanted to use my album as a

starting point and as inspiration for other expressions. So rather than performing the music live,

more or less as it sounds on the album, the album becomes a score that can be interpreted in a

multitude of ways that allows for new material and ideas to emerge. The role of intermedia in

this project propelled further collaboration and is also a way to investigate this duality of being

Asian American that is both empowering and fracturing. Dick Higgins, who popularized the term

intermedia in the '60s, differentiates it from the term multi-media. He claims that in works that

utilize multi-media, various mediums are brought together and placed side by side, without true

integration. Intermedia, on the other hand, aims to truly fuse two or more mediums together,

making the differences of the various mediums indistinguishable.[109] The difficulty in intermedia

is that a relinquishment of identity is necessary in order for integration to take place. Thus

intermedia is more of a process than a finished product. It is inherently unstable and fluid

because the mediums are in constant negotiation and are in the process of coming into being. The

use of intermedia in my work comments on the Asian American subject as an inherently divided

one. Similarly, my creative work represents this process of *becoming*, or the constantly evolving

state of Asian American identity, by drawing from multiple artistic disciplines. Multiple points

of view from specialists of different mediums, whether sound, movement or visual, are in

constant dialogue with each other, allowing the work to retain a sense of flexibility. The work is

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[108] Video documentation of this performance can be found in Appendix B: Documentation of *rotunda*.
[109] Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (2001): 49-54.

the collaboration of these disciplines that represent an Asian American identity that is constantly in-formation. Through performance art, video, and an ensemble adaptation of the music on the album, we simultaneously reimagine the album, *rotunda*, as existing across a variety of mediums.

The album release performance was divided into three distinct sections, that I will refer to as "sets." The first set was a reimagining of Serena Caffrey's performance piece, *All That Rises*, performed by Serena Caffrey, with improvised music performed by Nick Hon, Antonin Fajt, and myself. The second set was a screening of my audiovisual piece that features my hand-drawn animations paired with songs from the album, shown on analog television sets. The third section was the ensemble playing arrangements of music from the album, as well as new songs specifically written for the occasion.

Serena Caffrey's performance piece, *All That Rises*, originally conceived in 2017,[110] was reimagined for my album release show as a prelude of sorts. The performance started as the audience began to filter in. Serena began by gathering rice that had been strewn on the floor into a sack. The gathering of rice was done in a slow deliberate manner. She proceeded to carry the sack up a ladder, and then let the rice cascade back to the floor. This cycle was repeated a total of three times for this performance. Each musician entered the performance space in five-minute increments, injecting a new sound into the space each time, adding to the sound of rice being moved around.

This piece's meditative and cyclical qualities were closely aligned to improvisational strategies of onkyô, that were used during this performance by the musicians. Onkyô, a musical genre that came to fruition in the early 2000s in Japan, is a largely improvised music. David

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[110] Documentation of the original performance can be found here: https://serenacaffrey.com/performance/rice/.

Novak describes this music as "predominated by silences and pauses between sparsely placed singular sounds."[111] He also relates onkyô to traditional Japanese values in which silence and environmental awareness are stressed. He goes further on to state, "the Japaneseness of *onkyô*'s silence derives from postwar discourses of development and nation-building that have been crucial to Japan's modernization. The historical force of this international relationship connects *onkyô* to a Japanese perceptual aesthetic called *ma*."[112] *Ma* suggests a stillness or space and is also prevalent in works of Japanese visual art. Onkyô can be seen as the sonic representation of this concept and a reaction to the heavy noise of modernization. For the purposes of *All That Rises*, each musician improvised with the concept of space and stillness. Each musician also had self-imposed limitations on their range of sounds. Nick Hon played only with bowed cymbals and a bass drum that was connected to a contact microphone. Antonin played with just the slide guitar, and I played only accordion for the duration of this piece. Each improviser also focused primarily on the miniscule sounds of their instruments. For example, in my case, I focused on key clicks and percussive dribblings on the bellows of the accordion, as well as high long tones, all sounds that potentially obscure the commonly accepted sound-identity of the instrument. Each improviser was tasked with interacting with Serena's performance piece in several ways. There was the option to imitate the sound of the rice being pushed around as well as the option to support this sound. There were also opportunities to suggest a musical narrative that anticipated the cascade of rice falling to the floor. At one point, Serena injected vocalizations into the space, adding another layer to the sound world.

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[111] David Novak, "Playing Off Site: The Untranslation of Onkyô," *Asian Music* 41, no. 1 (2010): 36.
[112] Ibid., 37.

I had asked Serena if she wanted to remount this piece partly because of a fascination with the use of rice as a performative element. For me, the sound of rice conjured childhood memories of pouring out large amounts of rice to wash and cook for my family. So it represents something communal, something that must be shared. At the same time, as a young child, rice was also a signifier of Asianness amongst my elementary school classmates. Rice was that one food I wished my parents would never pack me for lunch to bring to school. I only wanted the ham or turkey sandwiches that everyone else had. So bringing rice into the performance space and into the realm of underground happenings, where I experienced alienation as an adult, conjured similar childhood feelings of shame and not belonging. But as Serena repeatedly enacts the cycle of gathering the rice and dropping it again, *All That Rises* highlighted the futility of hiding the rice, or containing it. So while this piece reminded me of unpleasant childhood memories, participating in this piece also allowed me to confront those memories and recognize the futility of the cycle of shame towards my Asian American identity that had developed at an early age.

The piece ends in silence as Serena reaches the top of the ladder with the sack full of rice. The overhead spotlight is switched off and Serena drops the rice one last time, in complete darkness. After the piece was over, there was an unintended audience participatory situation. We did not have a broom, but we needed to clean the rice as quickly as possible to prepare for the next set. So I began to push the rice towards the center of the room with my hands. Soon after,

audience members who were nearby also began to help.[113] It was a warm, communal moment that set up the conditions for the next set nicely.

After most of the rice was cleared away, floor cushions were brought out for the audience members and their attention was directed towards the corner of the room where four television sets were assembled. A12-minute audiovisual work featuring original hand-drawn animations, some footage that I had recorded, and songs from my album was shown on these television sets. The audio that was played came directly from the speakers of the televisions. The use of CRT televisions, an obsolete technology, along with the way the audience members were positioned, on mats on the floor, were conditions that were set up to simulate a living room environment. On the one hand, this presentation evoked a nostalgia for childhood. But for me, television signified much more than leisure and the comforts of a familial environment. As an adolescent youth, I was often captivated by television, but like so many other Asian American youth, I approached the characters and storylines with a certain level of ambivalence. There was often a sense that something was missing. Asian American stories often went went untold, and Asian American characters only appeared as stereotypes. Television was a vital part of the development of my identity, but I could never quite find myself in this environment. The other media that dominated my television set as a youth were the Korean soap operas and movies that my parents watched, which were also impossible to identify with. So the use of this obsolete technology in my performance as nostalgia for television and my youth became a reframing of an abjection. In other words, my video piece can be seen as a recontextualization of my experience as a youth, of

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[113] I want to note that the rice used in this performance did not go to waste. The floor was thoroughly cleaned before the performance and audience members were asked to remove their shoes before entering the space. Following the performance, the rice was thoroughly washed, cooked, and consumed during the reception that followed the performance.

the absence of Asian American representation in popular media and my inability to connect with

Korean popular media. This recontextualization is made possible through audio and visual work

that have an amateurish, non-virtuosic quality. This quality is central to my aesthetic. It is

perhaps a subliminal attempt to be more accessible to connections with others and to situate my

work, and thus myself, in the the best possible position to feel like part of a community and to

address the melancholia that is the result of the inability to see myself represented anywhere.

An interesting moment occurred during this set when one of my audio pieces, "two

course" which includes a recording of my grandmother speaking in Korean, was played into the

space as part of the video. I mentioned earlier about this being a "coded" sound on the album. In

the context of this performance and the screening of this audiovisual piece, it became a further

coded sound, as members of my family who were present were the only ones who were able to

recognize the identity of the speaker. There was a sense of surprise and confusion amongst my

family members who were present as to why my grandmother's voice was included in this

context. There was also a very latent sense of pride that I sensed from some of my family

members, as being the only ones who knew how this voice was related to me. I realized that what

I had done was to put my story out there, on TV. In other words, I had set up the conditions for

my story to seen and heard in this public setting, to no longer be invisible.

The final portion of the evening was an ensemble performance of the music from the

album, as well as new songs specifically written for this occasion. I played synthesizers and

accordion and was joined by Nick Hon, who played drums, trumpet and synthesizer; Serena

Caffrey, who sang and played ukulele; and Antonin Fajt, who played synthesizer. The set list for evening was as follows:

1. petty man
2. eve
3. I Spoke Harshly
4. callous
5. sailboat
6. organloop
7. left-handed
8. untitled[114]

petty man, *callous*, *sailboat*, *left-handed*, and *untitled* were all songs on the album that were arranged and orchestrated for this ensemble. *organloop* and *eve* were new songs that do not appear on the album and were written specifically for this this ensemble. *I Spoke Harshly* was an original song written by Serena Caffrey, that was collectively arranged by the ensemble during the rehearsal process.

When deciding on this group of musicians, the instrumentation of the ensemble was relevant, but my choice of these musicians to perform with, was less based on their individual talent or skill set but more on my personal connection with them. That is not to say that I ignored their talents, but I made these decisions under the belief that the element of familiarity can potentially foster a deeper collaborative, and ultimately more fruitful, creative relationship. Despite my position as authority figure over this project, I also wanted to set up conditions where my bandmates could be themselves. I tried to set up these conditions by giving agency to my bandmembers over artistic decisions, and also including songs that weren't my own in the set.

During the rehearsal process I had the realization that it had been nearly a decade since I last assumed the clear role of bandleader, and also since I had last shared my music with *other*

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[114] Scores for all compositions except for Serena Caffrey's "I Spoke Harshly" can be found in Appendix A: Scores for *rotunda*.

people to play in an extended setting (as opposed to performing my music solo). In the recent past, I have not had the drive to bring others into my creative world. Part of this had to do with my navigating the web of academia, as I explained earlier in this chapter, but during this creative process, by implicating others in my work (after not having done so for a really long time), I was beginning to bring forth a sense of my identity that did not have to announce itself so loudly and was not tokenized, but was allowed to simply be seen and be unapologetically Asian American. This was partly accomplished by the foregrounding of melody, which is why it was important for me to include a vocalist in the ensemble because of her ability to transform the melodies on the album that were instrumental and electronic to ones that were actually sung.

My decision to frame my performance for the general public as an album release performance, rather than a dissertation concert was a deliberate one. It was also important for me to present this work in a venue outside of the academic context. On a surface level, these decisions were informed by my research into the underground music community. On another level, I wanted to inject some kind of meaning into the creative portion of this dissertation that I felt I could no longer find in the academic sphere. It was important for me to present this work in a warm, homey venue like the Mortuary, as opposed to the clinical concert hall or the abyss of a black box theater. My motivation to present a performance like this one was not to showcase individual greatness or worth, nor was it to demonstrate new technological ideas, but what was most valuable to me was the human aspect of bringing people together, including audience and community members, but also the performers who shared in the experience of presenting the material, the hosts, the cooks who made the kimbap for the reception, and everyone who had even the smallest role in making the event possible.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have written about aspects of the underground that I have found both liberating and alienating. I have mentioned the qualities of this community that I resist against, while simultaneously trying to create work in this context. This harks back to David Palumbo-Liu's idea of maintaining suspicion of the promise of universal art, as I mentioned in Chapter 2. The tape release performance/dissertation show was essentially an experiment to see how I would be able to affect change in the underground community as an Asian American artist. I wanted to see what kind of environment I would be able to cultivate in this context and whether or not I would be able to create a welcoming and inclusive space. It is near impossible to judge these aspects of the performance without a thorough interview process of all of the participants involved, but one aspect I was able to assess was the terms of my own alienation after the show had ended. Ultimately, I felt accepted in this space that I had created, with the collaborative help of the community. It was an evening where the perspective of a person of color was centered. Within a community that is typically white and male dominated, I did my best to organize an event that would feel inclusive and bring people together. This organization process started on an individual level, with the composition and production of my album. This album was my symbolic offering to the community, which allowed me to involve other members of my community. Part of the conditions that I set for myself were to collaborate with as diverse a group of individuals as possible. I was successful to a certain extent, by collaborating with a venue whose artistic director is a woman of color, having an ethnically diverse ensemble, bringing audiences of different institutional affiliations together, and inviting family members to attend the performance. All of these factors contributed to creating an underground performance

event where feelings of my own personal alienation were mitigated. Paradoxically, the process of completing this dissertation has also taught me that I have to fight to keep my alienation, because in the underground community, it is easy to get sucked into color-blind narratives that can potentially erase my identity. This is why I continue to maintain an ethos of ambiguity in my creative work and will continue to address the melancholia (as nostalgia for the self) that still persists, while continuing to organize social events based on my values centered on collaboration and community-building.

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petty man

borey shin

eve

borey shin

callous

borey shin

so long you fool they can't see you

la la la la ya ya ya ya ya ya ya ya ya

ya

sailboat

borey shin

organloop

borey shin

left-handed

borey shin

untitled

borey shin

Appendix B: Documentation of *rotunda*

For documentation of the *rotunda* album release performance from May 19, 2019 at The Mortuary visit: https://bit.ly/31cqDGQ.