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Empowerment, De-Orientalizing, and Asians: Three Aspects of Self-Determination in Asian American Music.

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Abstract

Asian Americans experience on marginalization and their struggle against it is distinct yet not unrelated to other ethnic groups in the United States. They have been racially discriminated and othered while their gender identity suppressed, which amounted to oriental stereotypes of Asian Americans. The Asian American movement between the 60s and the 70s is a historic turning point that gave voice to the people once considered “foreigner” by the White culture and enabled them to counter the imposed images. Among other significant achievements, the movement stimulated a consciousness towards self-determination. Music is one platform that allows Asian Americans to express the desire. Yellow Pearl stands as the pioneer of Asian American political musicians with their oft-cited tracks from Yellow Pearl. Fred Ho is another proactive figure whose improvisatory jazz compositions challenge hegemonic social norms. Sean Miura, though himself not a musician, represents a younger generation who advocates artistic expression of Asian American. Despite these contributions, I still wonder how Asian Americans are recently doing in the popular music industry. Do they still strive for the same ideology as those mentioned above, and how? With this question in mind, my final paper will be a study of 88rising, a group of Asian American rappers. I will specifically focus on their music videos and lyrics and look for embedded political messages about Asian American struggles. I will also draw on relevant materials assigned from the class and online sources. I argue that self-determination is continuous process for Asian Americans. It is always a work in progress that permeates through generations and cuts across all musical genres.

Keywords: Empowerment; De-Orientalizing; Asian American Music

1. Introduction

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It was a Tuesday class for the Musics of Asian American course when we had Sean Miura as a guest. In retrospect, he is younger than many other visitors we have had in the quarter. Miura only brought with him a laptop that was hooked up to a projector before the class began. Neither did he play an instrument nor perform anything – it was a traditional presentation. But for some reasons, I was so absorbed into his lecture that I felt the entire class went by so quickly. While his talk was mostly about empowering Asian American, which was becoming a mundane topic running for more than few sessions, I was greatly fascinated by the extent of scholarly theoretical knowledge drawn on by Miura and how he aptly applied it into his Asian American community works. It was such pleasure to hear from such a scholarly-informed activist like Miura.

I mentioned my admiration for Miura because this paper is in great part inspired by his reply to my question during the class. According to him, one of the goals for his social and community works is to help Asian Americans achieve self-determination, and this vision was resonated throughout his presentation. During the Q&A session, I decided to ask him how far or close he thinks are Asian Americans from/to self-determination. He then said, I am paraphrasing, that there is no end to self-determination. It is an ongoing process for not only the Asian Americans but also new immigrants from Asia. If it is true that self-determination is an ongoing process, how then does it change over time? Since our main but not exclusive focus is on music, how is self-determination is reflected through it? How similar/different is the self-determination process in Asian American music between the 1970s to the 2010s? and how is the very notion of Asian Americans affected by the process? These are the questions I set out to answer in this paper.

2. Methodology

To examine the dynamics of self-determination in Asian American music, I focus on Asian American musicians and artists from three historical vignettes: the Asian American movement during the 1970s; post-Asian American movement during the 1980s; and the global, neoliberal age in the 2010s. I will pay specific attention on A Grain of Sand and Fred Ho respectively as a prominent representation of the first two periods respectively before turning to Traktivist, Wong Fu Productions, and 88rising as contemporary examples. I must note that my choice from the third period are not exclusively limited to musician per se. Rather, they represent a more integrated, holistic artistic figure, of which music and Asian American identity play a major role. Through the musical works along the trajectory of Asian American history, I argue in agreement with Miura's statement and from the perspective of an Asian immigrant that the self-determination is continual. I also go further to argue that its manifestation, at least in this context, is neither necessarily concrete nor readily tangible, but rather fluid and contextually contingent.

3. Literature Review

3.1. *What is Self-determination and Why?*

Since self-determination is the overarching concept in this paper, it is imperative that I address its definition for the sake of clarity. While self-determination has become one of the central discourses on numerous political movements and social activism, it originated as a core concept of international customary and treaty law that, according to American Indian scholar Joanne Barker, "affirms indigenous peoples' – "a collective non-state entity" – rights conventionally associated with statehood to the serenity of governance, territorial integrity, and cultural autonomy" (Barker 2015, 11). With the empowering and voice-giving potentials, the idea then became key to many humanistic research methodologies involving indigenous people who are othered and marginalized often by colonial state (Smith 2012). In this context the term "indigenous people" does not apply here for we are concerned with Asian Americans. However, the rights to culture autonomy is central to my focus on Asian American music. Self-determination can be put more concisely, according to Moral Philosophy scholar Richard Stalley, as an ability "to determine for oneself for the course of own's own life" (Stalley 1978, 40).

The urgency of self-determination for Asian Americans was not surprising considering their history prior to the Asian American movement. Economically, they faced legal disenfranchisement from, for example, the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1892 and were not entitled to economic freedoms due to the perceived threat (Lee 2014, 123–31). The most infamous political treatment imposed on Asian Americans, specifically Japanese Americans, was the removal and detention in several concentration camps in the US during the World War II. According to Asian American scholar Gary Okihiro, this forced mass dislocation remains the subject most written about in Asian American history (Okihiro 2005, 101). Culturally, the othering effect is experienced through stereotypes, most of which tend to lump all Asians as one homogenous group and ignore the rich internal cultural diversity of the geographically vast continent. The generalization becomes even more profound with the intersection of other markers of identity. On the one hand, Asian American men must fight against the image of nerd among many others, and Asian American women the orientalist notion of being exotic, mysterious, and submissive. With these deep-seated racializing discourses, Asian Americans are thus seen as "forever foreigners." Despite their upward social mobility and assimilation of the mainstream White culture, Asians Americans still, according to Asian American scholar Huping Ling, have to prove that they are truly Americans and loyal citizens (Ling 2009, 34–41). In short, Asian Americans are marginalized, their presence ignored, and their voices muted. In other words, their identity was, and still is, not self-determined, but externally-ascribed. In the next section I now turn to A Grain of Sand and how their music resonated the question toward self-determination of the Asian American movement in the 60s.

3.2. *A Grain of Sand: The First Voice*

In the early weeks in the course, we were introduced to and discussed in great details on Asian American movement as the first large scale political action by Asian Americans. We also had a chance to interact with Nobuko Miyamoto, one of the members of A Grain of Sand along with the late Chris Iijima and Charlie Chin. Although the band was active during the movement in the 1970s, it continues to exert strong influence and inspire many subsequent Asian American artists. Considered the "soundtrack" Asian American movement, A Grain of Sand, the self-titled album expresses core ideologies of Asian American movement: empowering Asian Americans and reaching in support of other people who are expressed (Maeda 2009, 127). Drawing specifically on works by Asian American scholars Oliver Wang (2001) and Daryl Maeda (2009), here I focus on the emancipating and multi-ethnic coalition-building messages from the album.

For example, "We are the Children" is a track that evokes and unifies the diverse ethnicity and background of Asian Americans through verses like "We are the children of the migrant worker," "we are the offspring of the concentration camp," "sons and daughters of the railroad builder." One the other hand, the phrase "who leave their stamp on America" at the end of each verse implies the Asian American's desire fight for their voices and recognition as part of American citizen (O. Wang 2001, 451). This track, along with others, represents an attempt to throw away Orientalist stereotypes casted by the mainstream American cultures

(Maeda 2009, 130). The most notable interracial commitment of *A Grain of Sand* is expressed in “*Somos Asiaticos*” or *We are Asians*. Sung entirely in Spanish, this song envisions the unity between Asians and Latinx as being, built in social action through metaphors like “we struggle for the same thing” and “we speak the same language.” In addition to “*Somos Asiaticos*,” there are other songs that also extend band’s multiracial commitment towards Native Americans (“*Warriors of the Rainbow*”), and African Americans (“*Free the Land*”).

Despite the close reading of *A Grain of Sand*’s political messages, neither Wang nor Maeda explicitly touched upon the group’s self-determination endeavor. This is where I offer my interpretation. *A Grain of Sand* eliminated the ontological ambiguity of Asian American-ness through the construction of pan-ethnic narrative. This in turn made Asian American as an inclusive identity visible. The very step of self-determination allowed them for space, their position, and their voice to be heard. Moreover, *A Grain of Sand* also implicitly situated Asian Americans within the state power matrices through the formation of multi-ethnic coalition, which, according to anthropologist Karen Brodtkin, constitutes a crucial part in engendering social activism (Brodtkin 2007, 98). As a result, a break was created on the chain, unshackling Asian Americans from the Orientalist gaze of the White American culture.

A Grain of Sand continues to be the voice for Asian American long after the Asian American movement. When Iijima passed away prematurely in 2005, a group of Asian American artist collaborated for “*A Song for Ourselves Mixtape*.” Produced by DJ Phatrick, the mixtape features many songs from the original 1973 album remixed to give a 21st century hip hop sensibility and address more contemporary issues (Maeda 2012, 149). For example, opposition of Vietnam War is transformed into declaration of solidarity with Palestinian people in Gaza. Though recontextualized in a new light, it is fair to say that messages in the original *A Grain of Sand* still holds true today.

4. Discussion

If the self-determination by *A Grain of Sand* represents the planting a seed of Asian American identity, the following discussion is nothing short of signifying its growth and maturity through the world of Asian American music making. In this section I zero in on post-Asian American movement period in the 80s through Fred Ho. However, this by no means is intended to be the archetypal of the trends in Asian American music in general. I approach his work from the standpoint of presenting one of many different forms of Asian American’s musical self-determination.

Despite the increasing socio-political consciousness among Asian Americans, Asian American scholar Susan Asai notes that they were inassimilable due to the persistent “oriental racialization” (Asai 2005, 88). Meanwhile, multi-ethnic pattern begins to emerge as Asian American musicians turn to jazz and hip hop as medium to express their identity (the latter will be discussed later). Number of scholars have tried to theorize Asian American’s gravitation towards the musical traditions racially constructed as African American. Afro Asian American connection is in fact a result of a long-term coalition dating back to the Asian American movement. Asai observes that Black Arts Movement provides a structural framework for Asian American’s utilization of Arts as a vehicle to free themselves from oppressing Western imperialism (Asai 2005, 93). More importantly, African American cultural ideologies were transformed from prototype to tool for Asian Americans through Free Jazz.

Musically, the improvisational freedom in Free Jazz is key to understanding the cues Asian American took from African American musicians, as Asai writes:

The thematic development of melodies rather than harmonic variation; using drums to add color and texture; employing pedal points and ostinatos in creating static harmonic environments; executing angular, jagged intervals to express abstraction; and performing modal scales, collective improvisation, and polyrhythms all enriched the jazz vocabulary of the day, prompting Asian American musician-composers to cultivate their own musical landscape (2005, 95)

The qualities described above demonstrate how the music starkly contrasted from its Western classical counterparts. Culturally and politically, self-determination of Asian American in this staged is reflected in African American experiences for liberation. “[T]o some extent,” ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong writes, “jazz is valorized by the Asian American musicians as emblematic of African American experience, but illustrative of particular parts of that experience — as an expressive response to attempted subjectivation” (Wong 2004, 178). Through this connection, sympathy, and appropriation, Free Jazz becomes a means to self-determination, and it is even more evident in the case of Fred Ho.

Fred Ho is precisely yet accurately introduced by Asai as a “Baritone saxophonist, composer, writer, and producer, ... [who] embodies the political and cultural links between African Americans and Asian Americans (Asai 2005, 96). A dedicated practitioner of Free Jazz, Ho believes that the music, at its organizational level, plays an important role in shaping Asian American creative music and improvisation, and in promoting assertion of cultural and political self-determination (Ho 2006, 1). To him, there is much more to Free Jazz than improvisation. Ho’s musical style – and arguably his personality – is politically charged. Critical against Eurocentric artistic/aesthetic forms, Ho wants to explore Asian American aesthetics that, on the one hand, include ancestral connection with Asian/Pacific forms and tradition and western and popular American influences; and deconstruct the white supremacist society and Eurocentric patriarchal capitalism, on the other (Ho 2006, 9–15). While Ho carries over from the 1970s movement the pan-ethnic notion of Asian American, he is explicitly critical of “internalized oppression” – the seeking of acceptance and dependency from White culture; he was against the idea that “if White media certify one of us as legitimate or

‘good,’ our communities finally recognize us” (Ling 2009, 350). While Ho’s statement comes from a radically political stance, it incredibly anticipates the next big step of Asian American musicians/artist self-determination after the turn of the century, which I turn to later.

At this point, multi-ethnic coalition can be said to have successfully permeated into musical front. With the underlying political motives behind Free Jazz underscored by Fred Ho and its appropriation by Asian American, I draw on Angela Ahlgren’s concept of racial triangulation between Asian, African and White Americans in taiko (Ahlgren 2018, 85). In this context, the racially marked Afro Asian American music exposes and calls into question the hegemony, universality, and the givenness of the unmarked White American cultures. Asian American Jazz musicians resists the body-culture determinism that restricts racial flexibility and disrupts the cognitive dissonance imposed on the non-racial/gender-conforming musicking bodies (Roberts 2016, 7; Yoshihara 2007, 188). This also conforms with post-colonial approach by Asian American similarly exists in literature as we have seen from David Hwang’s remaking of *M. Butterfly* that thoughtfully grapples not only with the similarly unmarked, colonial power of white, but also brings into equation the heteronormativity (Kondo 1990; Eng 2001). Self-determination here takes on the decolonizing and de-Orientalizing agency.

4.1. Wong Fu Productions, Traktivist, and 88rising: Virtual and Transnational Mobilization of Musics of Asians and Asian Americans

Since the 2000s, entertainment enterprise has changed drastically. Globalized market and democratization of internet are two of the most important factors that revolutionized mass media consumption. Despite this, Asian Americans are still underrepresented in the mainstream media compared to other ethnic groups in the States and encounter racial discriminations. Deborah Wong notes that the immigrant experiences still haunt them and that its material continue to shape Asian American youth (Wong 2010, 124). This nightmare of the past, however, did not deter them to strive toward self-determination amidst the “politics of globalization and transnationalism” (Wong 2010, 131).

Asians Americans in the new millennia do not wait for the media to come calling. Like Ho’s critical warning against internal oppression, they do not wait the approval from the White culture. Instead, they make their own path to recognition, and internet is their choice. It is here that they start going viral. Asian American scholar Christine Balance sees multimedia websites not only as an open stage for Asian American performers, but also as an alternative avenue of cultural production (Balance 2012, 141). In this section I examine how self-determination process is manifest contemporarily through three Asian American groups: Wong Fu Productions, Traktivist, and 88rising.

In their official website, Wong Fu Production describe themselves as “an independent digital production company founded in 2003” and claim that they have “amassed over 3M [million] subscribers around the world with over 500M [million] views for our [their] dramatic shorts and comedy sketches on YouTube” (“Wong Fu Productions” 2019). With the success they have, it is hard to imagine that Wong Fu had a rather humble start with a video “Yellow Fever” published on the same website in 2006. The video’s main plot is about lack of Asian American masculinity. Though their subsequent videos mostly do not directly deal with such topic anymore, Wong Fu still promote Asian American representation by featuring Asian American actors as well as producing music videos for Asian American artists. Today Wong Fu’s popularity goes far beyond YouTube as they have produced creative works for Netflix and are “recognized by CNN, NPR, and the White House for its striking quality and emotional depth as well as its authentic representation of Asian Americans” (“Wong Fu Productions” 2019).

As committed as Wong Fu to Asian American presence in the media is Traktivist. A DJ by practice, Traktivist’s real identity is Richie Menchavez, and he self-identifies as both Filipinx American and Asian American. Menchavez’s advocacy for Asian American music in his career is motivated by his observation of the scarce presence of Asian American musicians. He asks, “why is it that, after all these years, Asian Americans are still struggling to be present in popular media [or] mainstream media?” This leads him to establish a TRAKTIVIST Radio, an internet radio that, according to the station’s official website, “aims to bring music from Asian American artists to new and familiar audiences around the world, ultimately striving to increase awareness through artistry & exclusive interviews” (“TRAKTIVIST.COM” 2015). Dubbed as “The Sound of Asian America,” TRAKTIVIST Radio airs once a week, its first episode published on its official YouTube channel on July 2018 and its latest – the 29th – recently on March 2, 2019. Besides allowing listeners to stream music by Asian American artists for free, the station has broadened its scope to feature music by Asians all over the world.

Menchavez sees TRAKTIVIST Radio as more than a station and himself a DJ, and all about which can be found in its name. According to Menchavez, TRAKTIVIST is coined from track and activist. Tracks, in addition to meaning songs, also implies tracing a process. Activist is self-explanatory: a proponent of social movement. Menchavez looks at the radio as “anything that campaigns for social change...in the sphere of music.” The DJ’s interesting remark that “the goal of TRAKTIVIST is not to exist” (emphasis mine) goes on to clarify that there is still an issue about promoting diversity in music. As such, Traktivist and his radio resonates Ho’s internalized oppression and Balance’s invisibility of Asian American in media.

The transnational Asian approach hinted by Traktivist reveals the new form of media production and consumption where both artists and audiences utilize internet to disseminate and seek creative works unbounded by physical, political, ethnic, and even social borders. This leads to circular, transnational flow between Asian American and Asian artists. Jin Au-Yeung’s double-sided

career in the States and Hong Kong, and Wang Lee Hom's controversial "chinked out" style that finds its fan base in China are two examples we encountered in the class. On the other hand, the rise of Korean pop star BTS in the American top charts and the film *Crazy Rich Asian* not only demonstrate the cultural flow from the opposite direction but also show the emergence of Asians and Asian Americans in the US mainstream culture.

I have previously discussed the appropriation of jazz by Asian Americans. Now I turn to hip hop, the second African American music tradition that undergoes the same cultural process. 88rising is a production group that primarily feature this genre. While it was founded by Sean Miyashiro, the group's contracted artists are rappers with Asian descent. Their latest sensation is Indonesian rapper Rich Brian or Rich Chigga whose music video "Dat \$tick" has gone viral in YouTube, amassing whopping 114million view counts. Besides the enthusiastic reception, the phenomenon created by 88rising attracts several scholarly and journalist attentions, most notably being the group's appearance in an online article of prestigious music magazine *Rolling Stone* (A. X. Wang 2018). Hua Hsu, writing for *New Yorker* magazine, remarks that 88rising "has become an authority on how to create Asian and American pop-culture crossovers" (Hsu 2018). On the other hand, Pranav Trewn highlights 88rising's storming the media as a counter-hegemonic cultural movement; "they are broadcasting native Asian culture for the rest of the world, doing so without selling themselves as anything other than themselves," and disillusioning the plaguing Orientalist stereotypes so that "Asian culture in America finally felt appreciated as simply culture" (Trewn 2018). Through the rise of 88rising, I would like to extend from Wong (2004, 2010) by arguing that hip hop, in addition to being favorite expressive performances for Asian Americans, bonds and blurs the boundaries between Asians and Asian Americans, therefore catalyzing the transnational culture flow.

Self-determination of Asian American in this period share some similarities from the two eras previously discussed: multi-ethnic in the form of cultural appropriation, and resistance to hegemonic culture. While the political overtone in Wong Fu Production, Traktivist, and 88rising, is undeniably there, its intensity is greatly reduced. Deborah Wong provides interesting insights into the distinction of this new youth culture by attributing a "very different political profile" of what she calls "GenerAsians" to the "generational distance from the 1970s era of the Asian American movement (Wong 2010, 133). While Asian Americans continue to assert ethnicity and race, it is markedly without the 1960-1970 pan-Asian American community (Wong 2010, *ibid.*). My arguments are that the self-determination in Asian American music sees yet another transformation. With the constant flux of transnational cultural flow caused by neoliberalism, the self-determination is no longer exclusively shared by Asian Americans. Rather, it includes – but does not homogenize – "Asians" in a larger, global, and cosmopolitan scale, which leads to the very foundational question: does the term Asian American, or, for that matter, Asian American music, still hold up?

5. Conclusion

I have shown that self-determination always underlie Asian American music. Each may have unfolded differently, but all stemmed from community basis. The classic *A Grain of Sand's* quest towards recognition, Fred Ho's radical politicization, and the recent breakthrough of not only Asian Americans but also Asians artists in the mainstream media all prove Miura's statement that self-determination is a never-ending, ongoing process. It is always there – just not the same.

But why does self-determination change? The three periodical vignettes also demonstrate that cultural autonomy is an important aspect of self-determination. As Asian Americans continue to self-identify themselves, it is important to note that this very process does not occur in cultural vacuum. As Marinne Kondo writes about the dialectic of Song's and Gallimard's identity re/making in *M. Butterfly*:

[I]dentities are constructed in and through discursive fields, produced through disciplines and narrative conventions. Far from bounded, coherent, and easily apprehended entities, identities are multiple, ambiguous, shifting locations in matrices of power (Kondo 1990, 26).

As the context surrounding American Americans changes, so does the construction of their identity through music. This paper at least has shown the racial interwovenness of Asians, Asian Americans, and to some extent African Americans; its power relation with the White Americans; and globalization and transnationalism as some facets of many matrices. I should point out that other markers of identity are also responsible for the shifting self-determination, but those are beyond my paper's concern.

The shift from the pan-ethnic Asian Americans to the more inclusive, transnational, cosmopolitan, non-homogenizing notion of Asians may pose an ontological challenge of Asian Americans. To the contrary, I argue that this only underscores the fluidity of not only Asian American but Asian ethnicity at large. Eventually, this frustration caused by lack of clear-cut answer only resides on the label. This can be easily resolved by revisiting the Joseph Lam's key concept of Asian American heuristic device that we took as a point of departure in this course. "Asian American music," according to Lam, should be used to "analyze cultural, social, ethnic, and personal expressions in the musics of Asian Americans" (Lam 1999, 30). Further, the analysis must be carried out with "a series of parameters and discussed in musical, historical, and social contexts" (Lam 1999, 47). Whether in 1970s or 2010s, the musics of Asian Americans, and by extension Asians, continue to resist easy categorization. But to be sure, they never stop self-determining themselves, as does Sean Miura.

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