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*American Music*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Asian American Music. (Winter, 2001), pp. 365-384.

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*American Music* is currently published by University of Illinois Press.

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DEBORAH WONG

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## Finding an Asian American Audience: The Problem of Listening

*To deny what the audience produces in performance is to disavow its capacity to produce its own associations, in favor of an imperative to manage its desires with respect to a world of products run wild.*

Randy Martin, "Agency and History," 114

We were having dinner at an Italian restaurant in Riverside, California, on a rainy night in February, just the four of us. Writer David Mura was in an expansive mood, having just given the second of two public presentations at the University of California–Riverside; two of my colleagues, Ruth Chao from the Department of Psychology and Rodney Ogawa from the School of Education, rounded out the table—so we were four Asian Americans, that is, two Sansei men and two Chinese American hapa women, and the conversation turned to the kinds of topics that they do when the people around the table self-identify as Asian American, toward the conversations we (often) don't have when we socialize with our (often) Anglo partners or colleagues.

David asked us where we had grown up and whether we had had much contact with other Asian Americans during childhood, and we

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began reminiscing about our families and our neighborhoods. David and I grew up in White suburban enclaves, but Ruth and Rod had grown up in Southern California and had had friendships with Latino/as, African Americans, Whites, and Asian Americans. Describing his childhood in Pasadena in the 1950s, Rod suddenly stopped, looked at me, and said, "You know, I listened to African American music all through elementary school and high school, but I remember that that changed when I went to college at UCLA—within a year, I was listening almost entirely to White music." We started talking about the place of different allegiances in our lives and how these identifications have changed over time, and I asked Rod if I could interview him at more length about his listening habits.

This essay is based on that interview, which we had several weeks later.<sup>1</sup> I am doing two slightly unusual things here: I focus on listening and consumption—rather than production, for example, composers—as a way into Asian American cultural production, and I dwell on an in-depth conversation with a friend. The latter move is deliberate: part of my commitment to ethnography is a commitment to particularities, and I thus focus on one person in order to get at the dynamics of his life and choices rather than attempt a broad, totalizing look at Asian American listening practices. Writing about someone who was a friend before he became my subject is new to me, though I have certainly pursued many Asian American musicians who have subsequently become my friends. Working back in the other direction forces me into an accountability that can only be useful.

Reception, consumption, and audience remain undertheorized in ethnomusicology and performance studies. Most work on Asian American music-making (my own included) has focused on composers and performers, but this essay addresses the listening practices of a Japanese American friend. In talking at length with Asians of several generations, I am inspired by the study *My Music* and its main point:<sup>2</sup> that people are able to reflect on how they use and value music in their lives, and the ways they choose to articulate this are well worth listening to.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to listen, I am led to ethnography as an essential inroad to the politics of everyday life—in this case, the politics of Asian American listening habits. My basic argument is that listening to music creates subjects and communities, and that "taste" is socially, regionally, and racially constructed.

Listening practices are a crucial interstice for commodity capitalism and subject formation. At once intimate, individual, and inflected by global capitalist systems, listening is a site where considerable slippage occurs between agency and coercion. Neither producers nor consumers lie outside the sphere of commodity capitalism, but some of the most challenging work in cultural studies considers where and

how intervention can matter. Listening can be treated as a site “where social transformation appears in material form,” not least because any close look at consumption begins to look a lot like cultural production once agency and choice are taken seriously.<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau suggests that walking through a city constitutes the city—a rather extreme take on agency—and I similarly argue that listening at once constitutes the product and listener, though neither can be placed beyond the reach of commodity capitalism; rather, we must negotiate its flow through our lives.

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. In other words, I think it is worth considering how Asian Americans choose to partake in what *is* out there, whether it is “mainstream” (i.e., White) American popular culture or anything else. The uneasy Asian American location between Blackness and Whiteness is right at the center of these matters, and I consider it at length elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> I am not arguing that some musics are African American and others are White American: the ethnicity of music isn’t any less complicated than the ethnicity of people, which (just like music) moves dialogically between self-identification and coercive categorization. I think most of us would locate many musics in those ways even while allowing for multiple, interethnic audiences.

Dance theorist Randy Martin—one of the few critical writers to consider the dynamics of the audience—reflects on the ways that audiences experience “moments of common focus” that a choreographer controls through design, but he also acknowledges that audiences constantly shift between heterogeneous and homogeneous response to what they witness. Listening to the sounds of an audience at a dance event, Martin takes in the creaking of chairs, clearing of throats, and laughter, and suggests that “part of what the audience was trying for was the assertion of its capacity for evaluation. The audience was listening to itself.” If we move beyond the material presence of “an” audience sharing social space in a darkened theater, Martin’s conception of the audience opens up what happens when people listen to a music: they listen to themselves. But this act of choice and perception is no solipsistic mirror; rather, it is a critical moment of representation. Martin argues that the audience is always unstable, as it is only constituted through performance, and that this audience “suggests a mobilized critical presence” with “the potential to extend an understanding of the political.”<sup>6</sup> In Rodney Ogawa’s case, the construction of an Asian American listener took place through his consumption of African American and White American musics: one could say that he was trying in both cases to “hear” himself, but through a

politicized and ethnicized process of subject formation vis-à-vis musical sound.

This listening history is therefore a particular window on Asian American strategies for identity construction: listening practices (along with lots of other things) are constitutive sites for Asian American subject formation. Somewhere between Asian American music being made for an Asian American audience is . . . everything else, including my friend Rod sitting in his office at UCR with a poster of Miles Davis on the wall (see fig. 1). Rod, a Japanese American university professor and administrator in his fifties, reflected at length on his preference for African American popular musics during his childhood/young adulthood and his subsequent shift to mainstream White American musics during college. I am fascinated by Rod's account of his own history and habits precisely because he reflects on himself through the lens of education and Asian American Studies. Work in postcolonial theory has most notably addressed the impact of domination through education. Frantz Fanon particularly focused on the role of class and education in the experience of colonialism, arguing that the class with the privilege of education feels most keenly the impact of its own subjugation because it has closer contact with the agents of colonial domination than the poor.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, one of the longest-standing conflicts within Asian American studies is the relationship between its placement in the academy and its role(s) in the

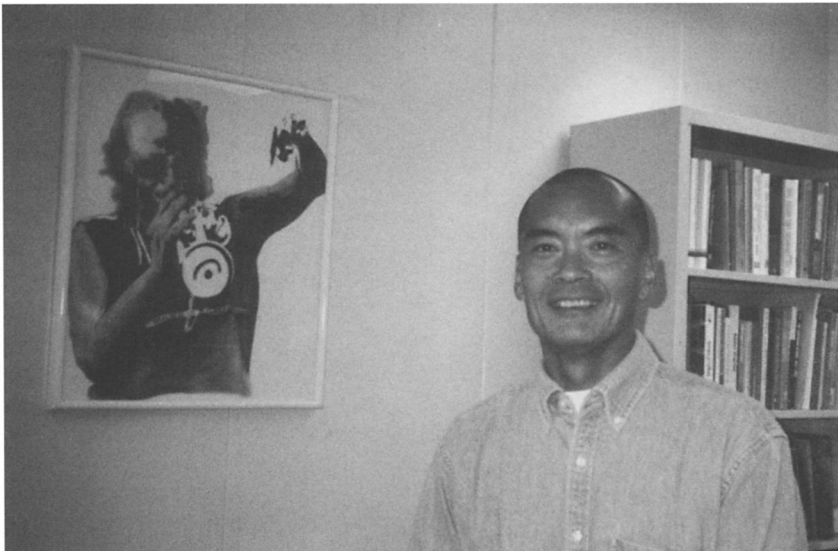


Figure 1. Rodney Ogawa in his office at University of California–Riverside, with a poster of Miles Davis. (Photograph by Deborah Wong.)

community; the ways that this troubled link begs the question of class has generated untold amounts of writing that is alternately anguished and utopian. Part of my interest in writing about Rod lies in his willingness to reflect critically on his own location as an educator, a listener, and a consumer of culture. Rod isn't more or less interesting than any other Asian American listener: rather, he provides an extended window—and one articulated in specific ways—on race relations through music. Indeed, we both proceeded from the assumption that the two are linked, and I acknowledge that part of my interest in Rod's account is in how he addresses the politics of listening pleasure through critical frameworks drawn from ethnic studies and the social history of education.

Rod moved from Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles to Pasadena in 1952, when he was four years old. In Boyle Heights his family rented an apartment from a Mexican family and he says, "I remember walking with my dad, you could smell the tortilla shops . . . We'd go down and buy fresh tortillas." When Rod's father helped his brother-in-law move to Pasadena, Rod remembers that he said, "'This is really a nice place!' You know, a far cry from—it's very much unlike East Los Angeles." Indeed, the neighborhood in northwest Pasadena to which the Ogawas then moved was mostly White and residential, and Rod says that that was part of its attraction for his father:

Yeah, it was much quieter, and it seemed—even though it was just down the freeway fifteen or twenty minutes from where we were previously—it seemed like a world apart. It really did seem like a world apart. Anyway, that's what attracted him.

Rod and his family settled into a quiet suburban life. Their move to Pasadena took place only seven years after the Japanese American resettlement following the closing of the internment camps, so many Japanese American families were still in the process of reestablishing their communities, creating new ones, and generally trying to recover. Rod's father was a gardener, like so many Nisei men at that time, and Rod's mother took in ironing and later worked in the school cafeteria. Rod joined the all-Japanese American Boy Scout troop.

Nevertheless, their new neighborhood changed dramatically about four years after they moved in, and their presence probably had something to do with it. As Rod tells it,

RO: When we moved in, you know, the little area that we lived in was still largely White. And then I started school. My best friend, from kindergarten/first grade/second grade, was a White kid—Bobby Cimeral. You know, we were just devoted friends. Then, between the second and third grade, White

flight occurred in that section of Pasadena at a rate that was absolutely breathtaking. . . . I mean whole neighborhoods would go from majority White to at least half-Black, just over a summer. . . . I must have been eight, so it would've been 1956. "For Sale" signs would go up. The way my dad explains it, as we [the Japanese Americans] started moving into these areas, we began to destabilize the ethnic solidarity, or the racial unity, of the community. Many of the White families started getting nervous. A Black family would move in and *bang!*—it would just turn overnight.

DW: You all were the beginning of the end. (laughs)

RO: Yeah, that was sort of the sense—that we were the beginning of the end, right! And so, very quickly the area, and hence the schools, became largely African American, at least in that neighborhood. I went from hanging out with a handful of Japanese American kids and a large number of White kids, to a handful of Japanese Americans—which was a growing handful at that point—and, suddenly, all of these African American kids. Now in hindsight, I was aware of the fact that there was something racial going on—that suddenly all these White kids were replaced by all these Black kids. . .

DW: You did notice this.

RO: Yeah, I did notice that, but it really didn't matter. You know, instead of Bobby Cimeral there was Buzzy Jones. And so, my best friends were Japanese American—I think for lots of reasons—mainly because of the strong ties in that community between church, they had sports leagues like they do now, they had the Boy Scout troop. So, everywhere you would turn, outside of school, almost all of my contacts were with Japanese American kids. The only place where I socialized with non-Japanese Americans would be at school—and there it shifted from White to Black. Maybe it wasn't as dramatic as I remember it, but that's how it felt. Between second and third grade, that summer, [it was] like the whole neighborhood just turned over.

So the Ogawa family's brief attempt at White American suburban life was, in fact, part of the catalyst for White flight out of their neighborhood. Over the next few years Rod's social life moved between the Japanese American and the African American:

And then, starting in the seventh grade, I started attending a junior high school which sits right in the middle of the traditionally African American community in Pasadena—Washington Junior High. It had this horrible reputation—people get in fights, get picked on, all this kind of stuff. I remember I was starting to get

a little nervous the summer before because of all this talk about what a tough school it was. It was maybe about a mile and a half from our house—maybe two miles from our house. We would walk every day, up this gradual hill to the junior high school, and we would walk right through what was largely, about 80 percent, an African American community. I never had a moment's trouble in the three years that I attended that school. That only time I got jumped was by another Japanese American kid who was mad at me for something or other—and that amounted to nothing.

The junior high school was 70–80 percent African American, and Rod says that this new environment had everything to do with his teen-aged musical tastes:

So [all this happened] right at that time when [I was] an early adolescent, twelve, thirteen, and starting to be aware of music and beginning to cultivate [my] own musical taste separate from what [my] parents listened to. You know, almost all of my non-Japanese American classmates were African American, so my tastes, all of my close friends' tastes—it wasn't just shaped, I mean we simply *adopted* [my African American friends' tastes]. . . . As a twelve-, thirteen-year-old, as Motown was flowering, I was just becoming aware of this music. I had a group of three cousins who, when I was eight or nine, were already teenagers, on my mom's side. My mom's family is very close, and we would see each other socially all the time. The three of them—Julie, Susan, and Naomi—would be doing their teenage thing together. They would be playing records, 45s and what not, and so we were exposed to that. And what they listened to was early rock and roll, a lot of which had very strong Black roots.

By the time we hit junior high school, while we did listen to other sorts of pop musicians of the time—like a lot of the young Italian American singers out of Philadelphia, that was all in the mix—but, by the time I was in the eighth grade, it was clear to me that the real music was rhythm and blues—specifically the Motown version of it. Through junior high school into high school, the Temptations were my favorite musical group, Smokey Robinson was my favorite singer (he fronted a group, the Miracles), and, you know, the Four Tops, the Supremes. We saw the Temptations, we saw the [Four] Tops, we saw the Supremes, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas.

At that point, Rod's listening was eclectic but he knew what his favorite music was. Motown was urban African American music, in fact the first mass-marketed African American music produced by an Af-



rican American studio; it was also part of a broader phenomenon through which the White American market encountered and consumed African American musical sounds. Drawing on smoothed-out r&b, gospel, jazz, and pop, Motown almost immediately appealed to a crossover market, which included the teenaged Rod in Pasadena.<sup>8</sup> Although some scholarly work has begun to examine the ethnic politics of Motown's appeal, none it accounts for Rod or indeed for any Japanese American teenagers in the 1960s, as "crossover" continues to mean White to Black or Black to White in the industry.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the identification of Motown as a "Black" music raises useful questions: it was regarded by Rod and his friends as an African American music, but Motown's place in the racialized imaginary of American popular music looks more complicated if one considers arguments by African American critics who suggest that Motown provided a model of assimilation for Americans—a means for making the Black body palatable for White/non-Black audiences even while clearly not quite, not-White.<sup>10</sup> Historian Suzanne Smith writes impatiently that Motown is now too often portrayed as a Black business that sought both Black and White consumers. She thinks it better to "shift attention away from Motown's crossover success with white audiences" toward a consideration of "the false promise of black capitalism." She has no faith that "capitalism can be enlisted to remedy racial inequality."<sup>11</sup> Postinternment Japanese American anxieties over the nature of "the American" put yet another spin on this: Motown appealed to Japanese American teenagers as *American* in particularly troubled ways that bring together the trope of the not-quite-White with emergent identifications across communities of color. Yet Motown was unequivocally "the real music" for Rod, and its identification as African American was part of its realness:

Of course, at the same time, there was the Beach Boys in California. . . . They . . . were very popular. We would listen to them, but when we bought records, we bought Motown records. And we dressed in what, at that point, was sort of African American urban style—black pointy shoes that you polished up, and I can't remember what kind of pants they called them, but they didn't have belts, they just had this band that came across and clipped. And we learned to speak our version of Black dialect.

Ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson has questioned White American appropriations of African American speech patterns, clothing, and music during the emergence of bebop in the 1940s, pushing at the limits of White hipness as incursion.<sup>12</sup> I write elsewhere about the parallels and differences between White American and Asian American forays into African American culture, and here, as in other cases, they

are not analogous.<sup>13</sup> Rod was making choices for particular reasons, aware of other possibilities but puzzled by them. He said,

When the Beatles came along in '64, it was like a nonevent. I mean, we understood it was important—it was on *Ed Sullivan*, right? I couldn't figure out what all the deal was about, you know.

Rod was not yet identifying with his African American classmates as a person of color relating to other people of color—those alliances were not consciously part of his personal landscape at that point (though this later changed). In his part of Pasadena, ethnicity and class intersected in provocative ways: remember that his family's presence tipped the balance of their formerly White neighborhood and that their tentative social mobility from working to middle class was arrested by White flight. Rod's parents, however, were still aware of their racial and social in-betweenness (and their placement as neither White nor Black); their home was *not* the place for experimentation with African American dialect, for instance. As Rod said,

Now, when we got home, of course, that went out the window. Mom would allow us to listen to the music, but the other stuff went out the window. You know, "When you talk at home, you speak properly!"

The differences perceived by his parents were not so evident to Rod. He explains his and his Japanese American friends' adoption of African American urban style as a choice between limited options, but a choice that still felt "comfortable." His high school was about 55 percent White, 35 percent Black, and 10 percent everything else, including about 5 percent Asian (mainly Japanese American).<sup>14</sup> When Rod was channeled into the college-prep track, his classmates were suddenly far more White than Black; he remembers that he was "surrounded by White kids" in his classes but that his musical preferences, his clothing, and his speaking style were another matter, and he notes that part of his choice recognized a certain absence:

I mean, while I was at school, I was probably shoulder to shoulder as much with Ronnie Butler and Bernard Clark as I was with Wayne Omakawa and Kenny Oda. It was just that kind of thing. And they had a version of American culture—it was Black American culture. With us, we [he and his Japanese American friends] didn't have that identifiable "something" indigenous to us that was still American. So we took what was there, I think. And it was very comfortable, and it was kind of cool, you know. I don't know. Yeah, it was a really comfortable place and time.

Indigeneity is, of course, one of the more vexed tropes of "the Amer-

ican,” and Rod was clearly aware of a certain cultural production of Blackness as American—whereas Asians have been constructed as “foreign” over and over again through legislation, the construction of Blackness as peculiarly and indigenously American already cross-hatched his and his friends’ experimentation with identity work. Nevertheless, Rod’s Black, White, and Asian American classmates interacted in specific ways and in specific places, as defined by the racialized geopolitics of Pasadena and its implications for class. Socializing across race and ethnicity took place at school, not after hours and not in each other’s homes; extramural sports was a sphere of ethnic and class overlap, but the curriculum and its tracking system for college preparation created dividing lines:

DW: Now, were any of your friends Black? I mean, did you visit after school with African American friends and listen to music with them?

RO: You know, actually not, actually not. Almost exclusively, by that point, by high school, it was with Japanese American kids. I had friends at high school, but we didn’t do a lot of real socializing after school. It was always *at* school. And then I played sports, so there, you know, it was everybody. Now, the high school I attended drew students from that northwest section [of the city], which was predominantly African American, but it also drew from some of the wealthiest sections of Pasadena. It was really a strange place, because, if you look at the map of Pasadena, Muir High sits in the northwest corner, and to the south and east of it was where the Japanese Americans and African Americans lived. And then, across the arroyo—which is this huge gully that runs through Pasadena, and I think the Los Angeles River runs through it, that’s where the Rose Bowl sits, and there’s a golf course down there—on the other side, is Linda Vista, which is—back when I was a kid—was all White, and all very upper-middle class, with professionals and management kinds of people.<sup>15</sup> . . . So it was a really odd mix for a high school. There was a college-prep track, there was sort of a middling track, and then there was the “everybody else” track. And if you looked at the distribution of race across it, it was real clear that, while there were probably more middle-class kids—because of the strong association between race and class—in the college track where I was (where I took all my courses), there was a strong representation of Asian American kids—mainly Japanese American and the handful of Chinese American families in the area—just a few Blacks, and a lot of the kids from the White areas.

So in school, in academics, I was surrounded by White kids from families with professional backgrounds. The Japanese American kids were working class. Like, my father was a gardener, my mom was a school cafeteria worker, and most of my friends' fathers and mothers had similar kinds of occupations—gardeners, maybe they were produce workers in a grocery store, but most of them were gardeners, a few mechanics, a few produce workers. I mean, sort of classic Japanese American, Southern California occupations for that time. And a lot of the moms were domestics or did stuff like ironing in the home for upper-middle class White clients. My mom did ironing for a while, but then she ended up working in the school cafeteria when my brother started school. So we [spent our time at school] within a very middle-class, upper-middle-class environment, despite the fact that we were very working class. But then, there was also this strong African American community. And our musical tastes, through most of high school, were by and large Black.

In short, Rod and his Japanese American friends moved between different spheres as defined by race, class, and the social imagination of upward mobility. The extent to which Rod interacted with *both* White and African American classmates—through the separate venues of the classroom and the sports field—was unusual for greater Los Angeles at that time, but their very separateness is also revealing.<sup>16</sup> Their preference for Motown suggests the complexities of identification across lines of racial and socioeconomic difference as well as across the firelines of parental hope.

Much later in our conversation, it came out that Rod had played the clarinet all through junior high and high school, but it was clear that he didn't think of himself as a musician, nor did he consider all those years of band and orchestra as central to his musical tastes.

I took piano lessons and I played clarinet in high school and all of that—yeah, a good Japanese American kid always took music lessons. I could play, I was in the All-City band and stuff, but I was never into it. I was *mechanically* okay, but I just . . . I never felt like a player. You know, someone who could just play an instrument. . . . I could read notes and I could mechanically reproduce the notes said I was supposed to reproduce, but I never felt—I've always been so envious of musicians who seemed to have this *thing*. . . . It's true I never really worked at it, because it was a duty thing—your parents make you take piano lessons. And then in school, you gotta play something, and I remember I said I wanted to play whatever, and they said, "No, you gotta play clarinet,"

because all these Japanese American families decided clarinet was the right thing, I don't know *why*. There were, like, eight of us who all played clarinet! In the same junior high school band! And then in orchestra, too. I had one Japanese American friend who was a year older than us who played trumpet, and the rest of us played clarinet. I'm trying to think of anyone else. . . . I had a Filipino friend who played alto sax—Ruben could play, now that boy could play. Kenny on trumpet was pretty decent and then there was this *army* of Japanese Americans all playing clarinet, all these little black sticks, you know. And I never liked the sound of it. I would trade Kenny for his trumpet and we would play at his house, and I found it much more interesting but, “No, we bought you a clarinet, you stick with what you start with, okay?” So we played the clarinet. Like I said, I got good enough to play in the All-City band, but—I don't know—it never *took*. It was kind of fun. It was more fun kind of hanging out with the people, being a part of the group and making the music, but I never felt like a musician . . . as I imagined a musician to be, and I don't know what that would be like, but I never had the opportunity to think that that was even a possibility, even as an avocation. It was what you *did*, like you did homework. It was like, you did your chemistry homework, okay, you're done with that, now you go practice your clarinet. I *hated* it.

Music-making was thus a duty, a chore, whereas Motown was a passion, pursued through the transistor radio in his room, through 45-rpm records, and concerts whenever possible.

In 1966 Rod entered UCLA and moved from Pasadena to a dormitory in Westwood, and his environment changed again. He continued to have many Japanese American friends, but once again he had more White classmates than African American. He got involved with the emergent Asian American studies program, and although many of his Asian American classmates are now well-known figures, his growing intellectual and political involvement didn't change his listening habits—for one thing, the Asian American music scene hadn't yet come together. Within months, his listening began to change:

[During] my freshman year, I was still listening to a lot of Motown, especially when I went home, but at school . . . well, things were changing. White music was starting to sound a lot more interesting. American pop music was taking a turn. Buffalo Springfield, youthful rebellion—I started identifying more with that world. . . . I was with different people, and they were listening to different music.

Reflecting on these changes in his music preferences, Rod said he thought it was a combination of his environment and the nature of the music itself—he feels that the rock scene went through substantive changes in the mid- to late 1960s that simply made it more compelling:

It wasn't that I wasn't listening to rhythm and blues at all, but the balance shifted: in high school, it was 70–80 percent r&b, 20–30 percent this other stuff, and it just completely reversed within four years. It wasn't as if Black musicians had gone away, but I wasn't listening to Earth, Wind, and Fire—I was listening to Cream, or to the Doors. . . . Part of it was company, but part of it was that the nature of the music began changing.

As an ethnomusicologist, I don't think it is ever “the music itself” that attracts or compels—music has no agency of its own, people do, and they make choices about what they like or hate; indeed, I would venture a guess that all Americans go through changes in taste during their lives, for reasons that are always already politicized. Thinking about his own changes, Rod theorized taste as the interstice between a listener, a social environment, and available musics.

While immersed in the rock scene, Rod was also aware of the politics of race in music. He listened to Jimi Hendrix but knew that there were questions around the “Blackness” of his music, and he participated in his own way in the racialized discourse of roots and origins that appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

After they had made it, some of the [White] musicians became a lot more explicit about their connections to blues and to African American music. . . . Like, Clapton would say, “I'm really a blues artist, and if I had my druthers, that's what I would always play.” When I was in the master's program at Occidental College in 1971, '72, there was a station in Pasadena that broadcast out of the basement of a church and they had a program called “Blue Monday,” and they played blues, and I remember sitting in my apartment studying and listening, and that's when I discovered Robert Johnson and more contemporary folks like John Lee Hooker and Daddy Oak. I went out and bought some John Lee Hooker—he had an album called *Steamed Heat* or something—and brought it home, and it was this revelation—like, “Oh my God, this is *really* music!” Yeah. But what took me there wasn't rhythm and blues, it was rock 'n' roll! So Motown seemed *really* silly by then.

I am drawn to Rod's discovery of the blues because of its tangled identifications and the way it provides yet another perspective on how race

is literally played out through music. While explaining his return to African American music but his increased distance from Motown, Rod acknowledged its route through the White American rock musicians he had grown to love. Of course, Rod is not the only American to have discovered the blues in this way in the early 1970s, but I would argue that a Japanese American's engagement with these related sounds suggest something nicely complicated about cultural ownership and appropriation. George Lipsitz has written pointedly about Eric Clapton's self-identification with Robert Johnson, suggesting that

Eric Clapton's construction of Robert Johnson has less to do with the blues itself than with the traditions of romanticism in Western cultures that date back to the late eighteenth century. . . . While claiming a mystical connection with Robert Johnson as an individual, Clapton ignores the economic and social structures that enable him rather than an African American to make a fortune playing African American music.<sup>17</sup>

Whether Rod came to and heard the blues in the "same" way that White Americans (or the British Clapton) did closes down the more interesting question of Japanese American positionality within the discourse of racial authenticity in music. The relationships between yellow, Black, and White in the United States have been critically examined by a few scholars,<sup>18</sup> with general agreement that, when the chips are down, yellow can be "a shade" of Black but not of White.<sup>19</sup>

As time went on, Rod became increasingly interested in jazz, first through Miles Davis's work and then bop and fusion. He says he was drawn to the complexity of jazz, saying that a lot of it was "opaque" to him but still attractive; he remembers going to the Warehouse with a friend, coming upon an LP of *Bitches Brew* in one of the record bins, and both of them agreeing that they'd heard it but didn't understand it. Rod connects his liking for jazz with his deepening scholarly career: as he went on to doctoral work, jazz struck him as "more interesting and challenging. By then, I was an academic, and I guess I started taking my head more seriously, thinking, 'I've gotta deal with this more complex shit.'" His younger brother turned him on to Chick Corea's fusion jazz, and Rod remembers his surprise in discovering that his mother liked Corea's music, too:

One time I came home and I walk into the house and I hear Chick Corea. I say, "Hi, Mom. Is Ernie home?" She says, "Nah." I said, "I didn't think so. Who's playing the music?" She said, "Oh, I am." And she looks at me, like, you numskull—"That's good music!" I thought, maybe there's a genetic thing going on here, because I never knew my mom *liked* that kind of music.

Since then, his tastes have remained much the same, though he continues to explore within jazz. Summing up his changing tastes over time, he said, "There was that shift from the time I was a kid, to the time I was an older kid, to the time I was almost an adult, to the time I was a young adult. I guess I stayed there for a long time." He still tends to return to the rock of the 1970s when listening to the radio:

But then there are days I just want to relax and not listen to music real hard. I won't listen to the Wave [laughs], which is real easy listening, but there are certain stations that play the kind of rock that I grew up with when I was a kid. There are days when I just don't want to be challenged and I just want to listen, I just want to tap my toe, so I'll listen to KLOS, to that old stuff. It's sort of comfort music. The Motown stuff I grew up with is real *nostalgic*, but . . . it seems really silly. I can't relate to it much at all.

Many of us in Southern California spend a lot of time in our cars, and what you listen to on the radio as you drive is deeply personal, especially since most of us drive alone. In 1998 Rod became the associate dean of the School of Education at UCR, and his new administrative duties have been quite demanding. I asked him what radio stations he's programmed into his car radio, and it turned out that he doesn't listen to anything at all when he's in his car:

RO: My car radio doesn't work. My car has a radio, but it hasn't worked for several months. I don't drive long distances very often, but when I do without the radio. . . . Maybe it's coincidental with my work responsibilities—I have less time to think about my own work, my own scholarship, so it's suffering. I had a two-hour drive back from LA a few weeks ago, and I thought about this one paper that I'm trying to work on the whole time and it was *wonderful* because I had two hours where no one could call me (I don't carry a cell phone or anything) and I had two hours where I could just think about this paper. [My wife] Chris says, "Well, why don't you just go have a new radio put in?" I even went down to price them . . . but I haven't brought myself to do it.

DW: Sounds like the silence is working for you right now.

RO: Right. So when we drive to Pasadena in Chris's car, which does have a radio. . . . Her station is always 105.1—she's always on classical music. She's very clear in her tastes, she'll listen to jazz but her tastes are classical. But she lets me choose [when we're together in her car]. Often on weekends I'll turn on KLON—it's a jazz station out of Long Beach, 88.1, it's hard to get out here. They play jazz-blues. . . . That's a sweet sta-



tion. Sometimes I'll listen to the University of Redlands station [which features a lot of jazz]. But if my radio were working and I was driving home and I just didn't want to think, I'd probably have it on something like KLOS, which hasn't changed since the time I was nineteen or twenty. They'll play an old Neil Young song or something, and I won't need to think.

In short, Motown is the only music that Rod has really left behind: classic rock and jazz remain his preferences, though they have different places in his life. His need for silence is evidently new and is related to his changing career, as is his occasional preference for music that won't require him to think.

Over the course of some fifty years, Rod has moved easily and fluently between African American and White American musics, and he himself identified his preferences in that way, that is, in racialized terms. The late capitalist mass mediation of American musics has created enormous tensions between intended/imagined markets—often defined in terms of race, age, class, and gender—and the complex realities of consumption. In the 1990s different forms of Asian American popular culture proliferated: magazines, films, theater, dance, and music made by Asian Americans for Asian American audiences are out there, though they are far from mainstream. Obviously, Asian Americans don't *only* watch or listen to things Asian American—by any means—and what we do choose to consume opens up Randy Martin's observation that the audience listens to itself. The extent to which we find ourselves, or don't, in particular forms of popular culture and why is partly the question, as it just isn't an Asian American world out there. The dialogical nature of performance works against an audience that simply seeks out mirrors of itself, that is, a performance "like" itself. Josephine Lee's arguments for Asian American spectatorship are well taken; she writes that the utopian ideal "of Asian American theaters full of Asian American audiences recognizing their common authenticity and reality has never been achievable." Interrogating work on spectatorship by such feminist theorists as Jill Dolan, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Roof, Lee is ultimately dissatisfied with their fixed placement of gendered action and passivity, in which watching is necessarily incriminated as voyeurism and control; she argues that some Asian American drama actively forces "a reexamination of our own conditions of spectatorship." She outlines the problematic ways that identification with an authentic Asian American experience is linked to realism, working against the differences that actually constitute Asian America. Ultimately, she calls such impulses "wishful thinking," finding that they reveal efforts "to find

solidarity in shared experience and at the same time expose the tensions and contradictions in these perspectives."<sup>20</sup>

Listening pleasure and political placement are ultimately interconstitutive. The musical sounds that we find pleasing or rousing or relaxing are positioned within the same material and political dimensions that shape the rest of our lives, and Asian American subject formation emerges from those choices as well as from many others. I know many Asian American jazz musicians and hip-hop artists who self-consciously align themselves with those traditions as statements of solidarity with African American political concerns, but an identification with those sounds can speak to less-conscious alliances, affective and beyond. Philosopher Jacques Attali treats all music as "noise," suggesting that music is merely social noise that has been channeled, controlled, or organized in particular ways, and always in the service of a given political economy. He writes that listening thus has strong implications—in fact, the first chapter of his book *Noise* is titled "Listening." "Listening to music," he writes, "is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political." Arguing that noise/music links a power center to its subjects, he presents the radically optimistic view that music is ultimately prophetic, that "it makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible," and that musicians are thus "even when officially recognized, are dangerous, disturbing, and subversive."<sup>21</sup> Listening therefore carries with it the potential for violence, freedom, and knowledge.

I believe that Rod's movement between musics racialized in different ways speaks to the uneasy position that Asian Americans negotiate between Blackness and Whiteness. Rod now recognizes that negotiation as political, though he didn't have that perspective as a young adult. His return to certain African American musics (e.g., the blues) as more "real" than other musics is not analogous to Eric Clapton's search for authentic African American aesthetics but rather tells us something more complicated about the ways that Japanese American and African American class and social mobility were outlined in Pasadena in the 1950s and 1960s, and the ways that this shaped Rod's political consciousness and identifications. Gary Okihiro quotes Harry Kitano saying, "Scratch a Japanese American and you find a WASP,"<sup>22</sup> but the upward social mobility hoped for by Rod's parents and attained by Rod through education did not assert a WASP but rather worked in tandem with a progressive political sensibility that led him to explore Asian American studies and, ultimately, education as a career. This particular formation of Asian American subjectivity is not split or fragmented between Whiteness and Blackness—the usual poststructuralist language—but instead was placed relationally,

through listening to the sounds of Blackness and Whiteness. After all, Rod didn't have the option of resorting to "authentic" Asian American listening practices. I dwell instead on that moment of realization and understanding when he reflexively thought about his listening in racialized terms and saw himself as subject to, and responding to, the conditions of his environment.

Finally, it is worth theorizing the place of friendship in this ethnography of listening. I place myself within contemporary poststructuralist ethnographic practice, where questions of subject formation have dislodged Elsewheres and Others. I could say that I "know" Rod pretty well—we have been acquainted for some three years, socializing and going to meetings together—but of course "knowing" is a tricky business. On the other hand, we know each other for particular reasons, as Asian American faculty members involved in Asian American activities on our campus: our friendship is based in certain political commitments, and the exchange discussed here is less "interview" than conversation; it grew out of previous conversations and assumes continued talk in the future.

Feminist anthropologist Ruth Behar has repositioned the "life history," consciously working against its traditional location as a genre that was not-autobiography but rather the recuperation and representation of marginalized voices—those-who-don't-write, those who must rely on someone else's pen, those "lacking access to the means of production and often even the ideological constructs necessary to turn talk into an autobiography in the first place."<sup>23</sup> In her book *Translated Woman*, she makes two arguments that help me situate writing about Rod. First, Behar notes that most life histories are based on a commitment to decenter expectations of whose lives are most worth knowing; second, she describes the life history as "a hybrid form that inscribes the doubled voices of a native speaker and a translator." Her emphasis on translation grows out of her subject, her *comadre* Esperanza, a working-class Mexican Indian woman whose life story is the core of the book; moving *across* nation, language, class, and ethnicity is the genesis for Behar's thoughts about life histories. Sameness retreats once looked for, but the conversation between Rod and myself emerged out of things shared, in addition to differences of gender, academic status, ethnicity, and age.

Elsewhere, Behar argues passionately for "vulnerable anthropology," that is, for ethnographic work that grapples with the emotional and empathetic engagements central to "knowing" people and places.<sup>24</sup> If I have become a bit weary of readers' easy insistence that we always "locate" ourselves within our work, and of the too-frequent practice of dispensing with this in a sentence or two, then I am also aware that my conversation with Rod could seem overly located, too

enclosed. Instead, I hope it moves out from a glimpse of one man's listening practices to the continued construction of Asian American sensibilities, including the cultural work done between Asian American intellectuals. In focusing on quotidian experience through the intimate pleasures of musical sound, I hear Asian Americans doing serious identity work while getting down and rocking out.

### *Acknowledgments*

The lion's share of thanks goes, of course, to Rodney Ogawa for his friendship and generosity in allowing me to make him into a subject. The two anonymous readers for this journal made very useful suggestions—in fact, I borrowed some of their phrasing. This essay was first presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian American Studies in Philadelphia on April 2, 1999, and I would like to thank Josephine Lee, George Uba, Neil Gotanda, and Garrett Hongo for their comments, which moved me forward. Comments from audience members in the Department of Music at the University of California, Berkeley were also a great help; I am especially grateful to Jocelyne Guilbault and Oliver Wang for their responses to my colloquium presentation there. At the University of California–Riverside, my colleagues at the Center for Ideas and Society—Hershini Bhana, Mary Gauvain, Paul Green, and Jacqueline Shea Murphy—provided spirited critique and suggestions at a late stage of writing, when such camaraderie made all the difference.

### NOTES

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1. Held on February 18, 1999, in his office at UCR in the School of Education.
  2. Susan D. Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi, Charles Keil, et al., *My Music* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).
  3. One study that stands out for its focus on fandom is Daniel Cavicchi's *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
  4. Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
  5. My book in progress, "Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music," addresses this.
  6. Randy Martin, "Agency and History: The Demands of Dance Ethnography," in *Choreographing History*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 107–8, 110.
  7. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1968).
  8. Jon Fitzgerald, "Black or White? Stylistic Analysis of Early Motown Crossover Hits, 1963–1966," in *Popular Music: Style and Identity* (Montreal, Quebec: Centre for Research on Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions, 1995), 95–98.

9. See, for example, Kimasi L. Browne's "Ritual, Music, and Class on the Northern Soul Scene," which addresses a White working-class British subculture of Motown enthusiasts (unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern California Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology, February 2000, University of San Diego).

10. Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," *October: An Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

11. Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8, 55, 255.

12. Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 396-422.

13. Again, my book in progress, "Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music," will address these matters at length.

14. I know Sansei of Rod's generation who grew up in other areas of greater Los Angeles and thus had other identifications, e.g., Japanese Americans who grew up in Boyle Heights and East L.A. often had Chicano/a friends and an emergent identification with the Chicano movement in the 1970s. Japanese Americans who grew up in Southcentral L.A., however, were familiar with the African American community but had little contact with White Los Angeles. Within the same generation, then, young Japanese Americans in the greater Los Angeles area had significantly different cross-ethnic experiences, depending on which neighborhood they lived in—and this was during a critical period when contemporary ethnic identity politics and coalitional ideologies were being formulated.

15. Mike Davis refers to "the old concentrations of Wasp wealth marooned in Pasadena, Claremont, or Redlands" in the greater Los Angeles area. In *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 375.

16. Writing about the Los Angeles Unified School District, Mike Davis argues, "The term 'Unified' is a misnomer, as for many years the District has operated de facto separate systems for Blacks, Latinos, and whites." He suggests that the synergetic relationship between rental discrimination and racial isolation in the schools works in tandem with "a regressive redistribution of park resources," resulting in "recreational apartheid" and the close control of public space. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 307-8.

17. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 121-22.

18. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); George Lipsitz, "'Frantic to Join . . . the Japanese Army': Beyond the Black White Binary," in *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 184-210; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

19. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 34.

20. Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 51, 57, 60.

21. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 6, 8, 11.

22. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 33.

23. Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 272.

24. Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).