

## Silenced but Not Silent: Asian Americans and Jazz

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In the early 1960s, a Japanese jazz pianist, composer, and big band leader, Toshiko Akiyoshi, dressed in a traditional kimono, made an appearance on the television game show *What's My Line?* The studio audience's laughter when she signed her name on the guest board in Japanese kanji script, as well as the host's stammering attempt to pronounce her name, revealed how unfamiliar mainstream American audiences were with Asians and Asian culture. Moreover, when she revealed her professional "line" as a jazz pianist to the studio and home viewing audience, the studio audience's audible reactions indicated the discrepancy between "American jazz" and "Japanese woman."<sup>1</sup> This distance has not been erased in the roughly forty years since Akiyoshi's appearance on the television show.<sup>2</sup> In a *JazzTimes* article in 2003, author Bill Shoemaker asks a central question about the continued marginality of Asian American jazz musicians "even within enlightened jazz circles," namely, "How [can one] change the American mindset about race and culture through the most American of art forms?"<sup>3</sup> His question answers itself, in part, by glossing over what the phrase "the most American of art forms" articulates. A reworking of the question might get at the central predicament Asian American jazz musicians face in the cultural marketplace: how are Asian Americans "not" American and thus foreclosed from participation in this form?

I would like to spend a few moments with Shoemaker's article as it succinctly displays the problematic positionality of Asian American jazz artists in normative terms. While his article is extremely thoughtful and gives voice to a number of significant Asian American musicians (all of whom receive some attention in this essay<sup>4</sup>), this predicament remains. Shoemaker is forced to admit that while "hybridity and multiple identities are increasingly central to jazz's discussions about race," it is still true that "if jazz is any barometer, the issue of race in the U.S. is still largely two dimensional: black and white."<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, he concludes his article by noting, "[The fact that] Hispanics have become the U.S.'s largest minority more than a decade ahead of consensus projections is just the latest indicator of the need to reassess the issue of diversity in jazz."<sup>6</sup> The inability to articulate an exclusively Asian American space in an article about Asian American musicians, even by a writer sympathetic to Asian American jazz musicians' marginality, indicates the difficulties they face in their attempts to be heard on their own terms, however unsettling that is to dominant perceptions of Asian Americans—perceptions fed by popular mythologies surrounding Asia and Asians in general that render Asians and Asian Americans "unfit" as "all-American" subjects.

Furthermore, Shoemaker argues that there are two underlying reasons for the exclusion of Asian American jazz musicians from jazz critics' historiographical project. One is the ability of "many Asian-Americans [to] assimilate into the American mainstream with considerable ease, sometimes, like ice-skating diva Michelle Kwan, rising to pop-culture-icon status with little or anything made of their ethnicity." Second, the "uncompromising [leftist] politics of the Asian-American jazz movement's early years" may also impact any inclusivist agenda Asian American jazz artists might hope to promote. While later I will deal at more length with how this version of the "model minority" negatively impacts Asian American jazz musicians' production of aesthetic works, I want to make the observation here that what Shoemaker perceives as an absence of ethnicity is actually a subsuming of ethnicity—a move that is not as innocent as the one he suggests. Finally, progressive leftist politics may indeed play some part in the critical reception of Asian American jazz, if it is perceived at all, by downplaying aesthetics and attention to actual performances in favor of promoting various political agendas, but this observation, as Shoemaker notes, does not speak to the contemporary moment.

I want to resituate the problematic predicament Shoemaker evokes by posing a question—"Is there such a thing as Asian American jazz?"—as central to my investigation of Asian American jazz artists, their relationship to jazz dis-

course, and the marginal position they occupy in the jazz world. Because my position is that there are many Asian American jazzes inflected in idiosyncratic ways by individual musicians, I attempt no definitive answer, tracing instead a broad outline around this question in order to contextualize the silencing of Asian American jazz musicians by critics, writers, and scholars. My primary interest is in how Asian American musicians negotiate the tensions brought to bear by a mute chorus of indifferent critics and a legacy of Asian American racialization that supports their disenfranchisement from dominant American culture.

Before I discuss specific musicians' strategies for dealing with this predicament, I want to briefly contemplate two formations: the discursive construction of a jazz canon and how certain stereotypes exclude Asian American musicians from participating as equals with other "jazz subjects."<sup>7</sup> My tracing highlights three important issues: recognition of Asian American jazz as protean and marked in different ways by different musicians; the fact that the heterogeneity of the Asian American jazz scene mirrors the diversity of the Asian American community itself; and the way in which the linking of culture, politics, community awareness, and individual creativity provides a rich and complex backdrop to Asian American jazz musicking.<sup>8</sup>

## **Black, White, and Beyond**

Normative jazz discourse, both popular and scholarly, represents jazz as an indigenous American expressive musical form that emerged from the confluence of vernacular African American and Creole musicking and other social practices, as well as furtive traverses by black and white musicians across the color line.<sup>9</sup> This narrative emerged in early jazz writings such as those of the European conductor Ernst-Alexandre Ansermet, who in a 1919 review of early jazz clarinetist Sidney Bechet described "an ensemble of authentic musicians of [the] Negro race" whose jazz musicking had finally reached Europe "in its living reality."<sup>10</sup> One of the ways in which later writers such as Hugues Panas-sié, André Hodeir, and Gunther Schuller attenuated some of the racialized essentialist notions implicit in Ansermet's review was to declare that although jazz was "the music of the American Negro, its universality has long since been established."<sup>11</sup> Scott DeVaux, writing more recently, resituates one of jazz's definitional boundaries within ethnicity, stating,

Jazz is strongly identified with African-American culture, both in the narrow sense that it is expressive of, and uniquely rooted in, the experience of black

Americans. On the whole, [African American] ethnicity provides a core, a center of gravity for the narrative of jazz, and is one element that unites the several different kinds of narratives in use today.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, jazz evolved into an embodiment of a color-blind democracy in action cast in reductive, masculinist, black-white racial binarisms occluding, however, the lingering inequalities between racialized, gendered, and classed difference off the bandstand. As Gene Lees, a former *Down Beat* editor and jazz writer, wrote in the conclusion to his book *Cats of Any Color: Jazz, Black and White* (a title that underlines my assertion),

One of two things is true. Either jazz has evolved into a major art form, and an international one, capable of exploring and inspiring the full range of human experience and emotion. Or it is a small, shriveled, crippled art useful only for the expression of the angers and resentments of an American minority. If the former is true, it is the greatest artistic gift of blacks to America, and America's greatest aesthetic gift to the world.<sup>13</sup>

Explicit in Lees's comment is the idea that jazz has moved from the African American community into other American communities and on to the rest of the world. He is explicitly not resigned to leaving jazz to "an American minority," a minority, moreover, that is clearly not Asian American. While there are notable exceptions (DeVeaux among them), dominant jazz discourse often assumes this particular shape whether a critic is arguing for a broader inclusion of white male musicians in various canonical projects or explicitly discussing race in jazz.<sup>14</sup> However, even as thoughtful a jazz scholar as DeVeaux is caught in this binary bind, writing that jazz "has been justly celebrated as an exemplar of racial harmony—a rare and privileged arena in which black and white compete and cooperate in an atmosphere of mutual respect, supported by a multiracial audience."<sup>15</sup> Asian Americans, positioned outside of this construction of "real jazz musicians"—as neither black nor white—remain silenced, and unheard, within jazz discourse.

In addition, the construction of Asian Americans as exoticized aliens, desired in certain constructions and moments but just as often vilified for their responses to the exclusionary practices of the dominant American culture, further reduces the chance that they will be heard as "real Americans," particularly when they are involved with a music that has been constructed within a racialized binary that excludes them.<sup>16</sup> Part of the "alienization" of Asian Americans has been the feminization or emasculation of Asian American

males, who, stereotyped as either asexual eunuchs or passive males, are hardly the robust masculine figures jazz discourse produces in its valorization of the “kings” of jazz.<sup>17</sup> Jazz tropes such as the “cutting contest,” “blowing hard,” and the “battle of the bands” betray a masculinist slant that forecloses Asian American male participation.<sup>18</sup>

Asian American jazz musicians of both genders are further disallowed from being heard as “real” jazz artists due to the model minority stereotype, which positions Asian Americans as noncreative “nerdy” types, liminally caught between black and white America, serving as a racial “buffer zone” for whites while viewed suspiciously by other disenfranchised communities of color due to the false belief in the upward social and economic mobility of all Asian Americans.<sup>19</sup> The still active arguments in jazz scholarship concerned with the authenticity and ownership of jazz—even by those such as DeVeaux, who seek to disassemble the black-white binarism inherent in jazz historiography—cannot escape the inability to hear Asian American musicians as jazz musicians due in large part to the distance between stereotypes about black primitive genius, the white bohemian fascination with black emotional freedom, and Asian American exoticist stereotypes, foreign both to American cultural norms and the extroverted emotional display or passionate abandon required of “authentic” jazz musicianship. This remains true, as we have seen, even when scholars attempt to critique essentialist and outdated stereotypes within jazz. Jazz scholars have escaped explicit exclusionary gestures but implicitly support Asian American silencing through a distinct lack of interest in Asian American jazz musicians, due in part to the maintenance of a critical viewpoint I have been describing.<sup>20</sup>

There are a number of rhetorical strategies that Asian American jazz musicians have used to respond to this fundamental problem, but I am presently interested in mapping how the ideological frameworks for mainstream jazz discourse and the specific racialization of Asian Americans have worked in tandem to reduce Asian American jazz musicians’ visibility as both “real Americans” and “real jazz musicians.” Deborah Wong describes this perception:

The long history of Other colors in jazz—that is, Asians and Latinos—is consistently refigured as absence. If the very idea of an Asian American jazz is new or strange, this demonstrates—successfully—the American hermeneutics of race as binary: either / or, Black / White. Any other kind of jazz simply isn’t [authentic jazz].<sup>21</sup>

Needless to say, this conflation of “real American” and “real jazz musician” ignores the global reach of jazz musicking that produces, for example, South African, Filipino, and Norwegian jazz artists.<sup>22</sup> While critics and scholars may be quick to respond affirmatively to both the global appeal of jazz and the rise of non-American jazz artists, the bulk of jazz studies focuses on American artists (again, largely African American or European American males). To support this emphasis, the argument is made that American jazz musicians provided the primary innovations and creative energies to the music. While I am not arguing, for example, that Cantonese opera had more to do with jazz’s “swing” rhythm than African American musical practices, the historical and social context for jazz musicking has long since reached beyond the New Orleans brothel, Chicago’s “black and tan” clubs, or New York’s Harlem district.<sup>23</sup> Nor am I arguing for the erasure of African American musicians or their importance to the creation and development of jazz; nor am I advocating that jazz now “belongs to everyone,” having been sufficiently dislocated from the histories of oppression and creative contestation that African American musicking articulates. Rather, my point is that the long exclusion of Asian American histories in other areas is mirrored in the historiographical silence regarding Asian American jazz musicians, particularly in the present moment.<sup>24</sup>

### “We’ve Been Here, Too”

The tenor saxophonist Francis Wong emphasizes the long historical trajectory of Asians and their involvement with “Western” popular musicking both within the United States and in Asia and the “Brown Pacific.”<sup>25</sup> Pointing to historical and ethnographical work such as George Yoshida’s *Reminiscing in Swingtime: Japanese Americans in American Popular Music*, Wong reminds us that Asians have been producing “Western” popular music since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. In an interview, Wong asked, rhetorically but provocatively, “What is the history of popular song?” In answering his own question, he revealed much that has been hidden in popular music discourse.

[Let’s suppose] that [the] American popular form was [not] limited to only music that was made in the continental United States. Let’s say you included music that was made in Hawai’i, in those forms, and made, if not recorded, in places like Shanghai, Hong Kong, Japan. Because the great thing about Japan—a few years ago there was this Sony retrospective on swing music recorded in Japan but a lot of the musicians on those recordings were Japanese Americans. So what do you say about that? Is that American music? Should it be on the radar at all?<sup>26</sup>

Wong's answer provides a way of understanding the historical currents beneath contemporary Asian American jazz and a possible rationale for their discursive silencing. Because of racialized hiring practices in musicians' unions in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, many Asian American musicians were forced to perform on Asia-bound cruise ships, and many of them found lucrative careers in Japan and China. Like black entertainers in America who found the life of an itinerant musician or dancer preferable to the miserable existence found at the bottom of the industrial labor force, many of these expatriate Japanese American musicians found the difficult life of an entertainer preferable to the manual labor jobs in agriculture, for instance, in which they would otherwise have been employed.<sup>27</sup> Doubtless, the promise of fame and fortune, though rarely achieved, also held out a greater incentive than an anonymous life of drudgery and hard labor that held scant opportunity for any real material gain. For these reasons, and because their careers occurred largely outside the United States, Asian American musicians (i.e., U.S. citizens) from this period have been effaced in jazz histories.<sup>28</sup>

In a similar fashion, Filipino musicians, because of their long contact with Spanish and American culture, were able to produce Western-style popular music and dance, becoming known as "the entertainers of the Far East" or, as Wong put it, "As part of the United States' territories, [Filipino bands] were the real territory bands!" Normative jazz discourse, however, has continually registered real jazz as an "indigenous" American cultural form.<sup>29</sup> Again, this "Americanization" of authentic jazz silences Asian jazz musicians. Wong elaborates on this theme.

Sure, these records sold and had their influence in the world. [But] there's another way to look at it. Tatsu Aoki, my friend, the bass player from Chicago, he's the same age as I am. So he gets this question sometimes: "How come you play the blues or jazz? You're from Japan!" [His answer is] because it was forced down our throats during the occupation.<sup>30</sup>

Wong's anecdote about Aoki indicates the role of U.S. military power in the dissemination of American popular culture. Military and political leaders have long realized that the ideological underpinnings of cultural expression, particularly popular culture, serve to inculcate subordinated populations in dominant institutions and structures of feeling. Unfortunately, this is another topic that I can only point toward in this essay, but I cannot emphasize too strongly the value-laden labor popular culture is able to do as an adjunct to mili-

tary strength and diplomatic pressure, a “forcing down the throats” of non-American populations of U.S. ideology or, at the very least, a show of American cultural domination.

More important to this essay, Aoki’s response locates jazz musicking in Asia in a specific way. American popular music, of which jazz is but a part, is “forced down the throats” of occupied populations. The colonialist resonance is unavoidable, and yet, like the South Asian cricket player or the French-speaking Algerian, these coerced practices become “indigenized” or “made local” and begin to transform the once-foreign practice and the foreign introducer as well as the indigenous practitioner.<sup>31</sup> Aoki, instead of rejecting jazz, gains a cultural practice that he, in turn, makes “his own,” transforming both the terms (jazz, Japanese musician) and the terms of engagement (occupation, cultural dominance). This admittedly disproportionate cultural reciprocity, then, becomes a new cultural expression, reflecting the histories on both sides of the exchange. I want to be careful here about raising the idea of hybridity with, as Paul Gilroy asserts, its presupposition of “two anterior purities,” because I agree with him that “there isn’t any anterior purity. . . . Cultural production is not like mixing cocktails.”<sup>32</sup> As Gilroy indicates, cross- and transcultural contact and transformation happen in “already mixed” peoples, spaces, ideas, and dreams. The responsible task for the critic, then, is to follow the lines of contact, while acknowledging the futility of unraveling the fused object “back” into two single strands, to find the complex interweavings of histories, including power relations, cultural expressions (both as individual and collective expressions), and other social relationships without also reifying the moment of mixture (thus allowing the process to continue and enact other mixtures).

Again, in calling jazz an American music I do not want to elide the centrality of African American musical practice in forming jazz but to emphasize how jazz has been discursively shaped into a “multicultural” musicking that expressively renders American assimilation and integration. Jazz discourse allows for the transformative articulation of South American, Cuban, and European jazz musicians who are able to “indigenize” jazz musicking into legitimate jazz forms. “Latin jazz,” “European jazz,” and even “Gypsy jazz,” while arguably problematic categories, are still considered legitimate forms of jazz, if somewhat subsidiary to a North American “mainstream.” Yet a corresponding “Asian (or Asian American) jazz” has yet to emerge. As we will see, there are Asian American jazz musicians who are ambivalent or even antagonistic toward such a project. However, one only has to consider how dif-



ferently Gonzalo Rubalcaba or Django Reinhardt is positioned in relation to Jon Jang or Mark Izu to comprehend this situation.<sup>33</sup> My point, however, is not to indicate how a musician becomes known or unknown, acclaimed or disparaged, as an *individual* but to point out how it is impossible for a musician to claim an Asian jazz background. An Asian jazz musician is always seen as “coming into” a jazz tradition from an external space.

Yet what is evident is that Asian Americans, even when they were displaced from the United States and normative jazz discourse, were nonetheless involved in jazz musicking as early as the 1920s.<sup>34</sup> In terms of indigenizing jazz in Asia, it is worthwhile to note that, because of expatriate Asian Americans’ involvement in the popular music scenes of Shanghai and Tokyo, an inevitable blending of Chinese, Japanese, and African American music cultures occurred. The “jazzing” of Chinese and Japanese folk songs is one way to measure this cross-cultural traffic.<sup>35</sup> Francis Wong references recorded documentation of this movement (in fact, he has recorded “jazzed” versions of Chinese and Japanese folk songs).

There is a record of that period [1910–46]; there were several record companies. Because, at least for Chinese [audiences], there were at least three record companies doing a variety of music—Chinese or Cantonese opera, dance music. You can find recordings of Chinese folk songs set to swing or Latin music. So it wasn’t just covers of swing tunes, although I think there was some of that. But I think the most interesting stuff is Chinese folk songs or Chinese pop songs in popular dance rhythms, which is essentially [the] jazz of that period.<sup>36</sup>

This early historical record of the movement between jazz and Asian musical idioms has been sadly ignored by jazz historians and has implications that continue to resonate today.<sup>37</sup> If jazz musicking in its commodity form is partially invested in its marketability, then jazzed versions of Chinese folk songs may, in fact, be too marginal for large corporations to promote and distribute. Does the failure to promote jazz versions of Chinese folk songs further their marginality or would more active promotion actually induce greater sales? The issue I would like to raise here, though, is not whether such recordings would sell but whether there has been a predetermination made by the culture industry about the marketability of jazzed Chinese folk songs that underscores the critical silencing of Asian American jazz artists.<sup>38</sup>

The history of Asian American jazz musicking, as Francis Wong suggests, is the foregrounding of a series of “re-cognitions.”

The idea [is] to recognize that the art form [jazz] is practiced in our communities and it has a relationship to the social historical development of our communities. . . . Fact: this art form was practiced in these communities. [The] fact is that it was practiced in these communities in the form that it was practiced in other communities—whether it’s the drum and bugle corps or the swing band, the avant-garde free jazz, whatever. . . . It’s just like saying, “We’ve been here, too.” And recognizing that we’ve been here too actually strengthens the idea about how important this art form is.<sup>39</sup>

Wong testifies to the fact that Asians not only have a long trajectory of producing Western popular music but have done so in ways that resemble the methods of other producers of Western popular music. Asian Americans, in other words, produce music that would have the ability to move beyond the Little Tokyos, Saigons, and Seouls were it not for the cultural politics of the culture industry and the “perpetual foreigner” image that disbars Asians and Asian Americans from participating in “non-Asian” cultural endeavors and prevents audiences and critics from viewing Asian American artists and audiences as possessing the same acumen, talents, and taste formations as do members of other communities.<sup>40</sup> The representational legacy of “exotic” Asian Americans results in a widely held perspective that does not allow for Asian American participation in contemporary mainstream cultural production—in which jazz musicking has taken its “proper” place.<sup>41</sup>

## Opening Chords

The time of the burgeoning Asian American jazz scene had much to do with the links between Asian American jazz, a nascent pan-Asian identity in progressive Asian American politics, and collaboration with, as well as inspiration from, African American models.<sup>42</sup> Asian American jazz came to its first maturation during the late 1970s and early 1980s when leftist political activism, pan-Asian American identity formation, and a growing sense of a specific Asian American aesthetic and musicking intersected in provocative ways. Similar to the ways in which some African American free jazz musicians connected black nationalist politics with their musicking, these young Asian Americans began to formulate a similar connection, explicitly drawing on black mentors and models. As the pianist Jon Jang relates in an interview with Nic Paget-Clarke,

Part of what Francis [Wong’s] and my music is about is the collaboration of Asian Americans and African Americans. As musicians who work in the world of jazz,

who speak the language of jazz, we honor that tradition. We respect African Americans. Our race relationships have been strong because as artists we've developed that respect and understanding.<sup>43</sup>

Jang's second recording, *Are You Chinese or Charlie Chan?* was released in 1984, and on the day of its release he performed with his ensemble at the Asian Pacific Student Union conference. As he related later, "We sold about sixty records at the conference. Students were asking me to autograph the record. There was a tremendous response."<sup>44</sup> Francis Wong expands on this theme.

I think it's the politics. The period in which we emerged, '84, '85, '86, and '87—when we finally formed Asian Improv [a record label owned by Wong and Jang], those were the years of Jesse Jackson's first run for president. It was the years of the Vincent Chin campaign. It was the years of the fight against the Simpson-Mazzoli bill. '82 through '88 were high-water marks for the Asian American consciousness movement. I think that was the context for the formation of an Asian American music label.<sup>45</sup>

Though Jang and Wong both designate 1988 as a pivotal transformative moment in their association with an explicitly political Asian American stance, the early years of their creative endeavors were also informed and shaped by an Asian American political agenda. I will deal with how this position changed for them shortly, but for the moment I would like to remain situated in the first years of the creation of what is now known as Asian American jazz.

Another band, United Front, included both Asian American and African American members, reflecting the trans- and cross-cultural perspective within Asian American jazz. Founded in 1980 by two African Americans, the alto saxophonist Lewis Jordan and trumpeter George Sams, the band soon added Japanese American bassist Mark Izu and, somewhat later, African American, Choctaw, and Japanese drummer Anthony Brown. Their political activism led them to perform at political rallies as well as jazz clubs. Another connection to progressive political struggles was their use of texts written by such African American thinkers as Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X in conjunction with their music. As Brown explained to Brian Auerbach in *Down Beat* magazine,

It wasn't a conscious choice to select political works, but it fits right in with the music. It just happened that poetry that is really strong and to the point is oft-times political. It makes sense considering the times we are in. Words go right to the heart of the matter, which is what we try to do with the music. So it fits right in.<sup>46</sup>

The debt to African American artists and activists can also be seen in the strategies these Asian American jazz artists utilized in order to distribute their creative musicking. Francis Wong states,

RPM was the label for the band, United Front. It was the label they had created to be a vehicle for their recordings. The self-produced approach has a long tradition in creative music, in jazz—from Strata East that was run by African American musicians; to Debut Records, Max Roach and Charles Mingus’s label; to Sun Ra who had his own label. . . . The idea is creating the work, producing it yourself, and trying to have some independence. We didn’t really have a choice because we were excluded and disenfranchised. We needed to have something. It’s not like Jon [Jang] could make a recording and then automatically have an outlet for his work. He had to create that vehicle for himself so we collaborated together to form [the record label] Asian Improv.<sup>47</sup>

This turn to self-determination in the face of disenfranchisement is not only found in African American models. But while African Americans have a long history of political and social struggle they can draw from in their continuing fight for social equity, in the existing national mythology Asian Americans, particularly after World War II, had quietly assimilated in the limited ways allowed them. There was little public consciousness about Asians who challenged racist stereotypes such as the labor organizers on Hawai’ian plantations and Californian agricultural concerns in the early 1900s, writers such as Carlos Bulosan and Sui Sin Far, and World War II era activists such as Fred Korematsu and Frank Emi.<sup>48</sup>

The Asian American political movement of the period heightened awareness of these earlier struggles, and Asian American jazz musicians began to weld their aesthetics (largely based in a free jazz idiom) to progressive leftist politics. Jang, in an article for *East Wind*, wrote about how acquiring a politicized aesthetic began to inform his musicking.

Feeling the thrust of the [Asian American] Movement helped reshape “East Wind” and “Are You Chinese or Charlie Chan?” on a higher political and artistic level. The “Charlie Chan” piece was no longer a “light” sarcastic blues rap, but also expressed “heavier” elements revealed in the anti-Asian violence theme of Vincent Chin.<sup>49</sup>

He also notes the coalitional possibilities for the music as he recounts different moments at concerts where he felt it opened “people’s vision and feelings for revolution more broadly,” stating unequivocally that “these experiences have shown me how music can play an important role in building unity, not only for

Asians, but for all oppressed nationalities and working class people.”<sup>50</sup> The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the political awakening of a sizable minority of Asian American youths, who were largely college educated and politicized during their college tenure. Asian American jazz musicians, taking a page from African American jazz artists, began to link their musicking to their political beliefs. While they began to generate small but dedicated followings, organizing jazz concerts (eventually establishing the Asian American Jazz Festival), forming distribution networks, applying successfully for arts grants and musical commissions, and pursuing other funding opportunities, their music, which was indebted to the free jazz aesthetic as performed and conceptualized by Archie Shepp and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM), was not readily accessible to mainstream audiences.

They were also blending Asian instrumentation and, for some such as Mark Izu and Jon Jang, exploring traditional Asian musicking, including pedagogical methodologies and performance practices. This attention to traditional Asian musicking marked their seriousness and designated their music as more than merely an additive “exoticism,” as was often the case in earlier attempts to blend Asian musicking with jazz.<sup>51</sup> It is this aesthetic and cultural turn that begins to signify the shift of Asian American jazz, away from the political awakening of its early formation for some artists.

### Asian American Jazz Changes

The drummer Anthony Brown defines *Asian American jazz* as “jazz produced with an Asian American sensibility.”<sup>52</sup> The questions begged, of course, are what is an Asian American sensibility and what differentiates it from other musical sensibilities? Brown, who holds a doctorate in ethnomusicology, elucidates what he means by listing the five criteria he uses to define *Asian American jazz*. Asian American jazz is “played by Asian Americans, reflecting the Asian American experience [and] involving traditional Asian instruments [as well as] traditional approaches to those instruments.” Moreover, the use of traditional instruments and approaches must be “malleable or open enough to really start to incorporate and start to take on other influences—in this case, jazz.”<sup>53</sup> He explains,

I think that in the Asian American community we wanted to express our experience, not only through African American jazz—and it’s primarily African American sensibilities because of the examples set by Charles Mingus, Rahsaan Roland

Kirk, Archie Shepp, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, these people who also had invested such a great deal of social justice, social activism, and spirituality in their music. And so they served as our original models. [But] when we started to create our own music . . . [it started] to take on another shape because of the inclusion of Asian instruments and sensibilities.

Asian American jazz, for Brown, is rooted in the struggles for Asian American empowerment and identity. Brown continues, highlighting the self-determined identification that the signifier “Asian American jazz” provides: “I don’t like labels but I think it’s a necessary evil. [And] if [the label Asian American jazz] is going to be used, then I want to be able to define it. I want to have something to say about its definition.”

The saxophonist Fred Ho also sees his musicking and political beliefs as part of a unified aesthetic, merging creative work and political activity. Here is his summation of his artistic and political activities.

I have been a professional baritone saxophonist, composer / arranger, band leader, writer, activist and (more recently) producer in New York City for almost two decades. Some regard me as “successful” because I am able to make a living solely from my music. . . . I consider my “success” not in mainstream bourgeois terms of “fame and fortune” but in the fact that I have been able to unite my career, my art and my revolutionary politics.<sup>54</sup>

Ho has managed this in spite of—not because of—current jazz discourse and contemporary cultural industry practices. Moreover, it is his intention “to continue mixing African and Chinese influences in the musical score to be performed not by a standard Western European-style orchestra, but by my Afro Asian Music Ensemble.”<sup>55</sup> Ho sees the importance of the label Asian American jazz, as it

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.<sup>56</sup>

Ho states in his article that the decision by Asian Improv Records (AIR) to produce more “accessible” works meant for him “tailing the familiar and conventional,” which caused him to leave AIR.<sup>57</sup>

Ho’s and Brown’s insistence on a highly visible political stance, as well as

the resilience of the label Asian American jazz, may be increasingly anachronistic, however. In response to the political and social contexts in which Asian American jazz often enunciates itself, Francis Wong declares,

The problem with this whole political thing—which I don’t like—is that somehow it’s like we’re choosing [that] the primary aspect [of our music] is to express our political [views]. But it’s not. I’m really into the music. . . . Now I’m also a political person. I’ve been through the 1960s, so I’m a serious person. . . . I care about what happens in the world. So a lot of it is like truth comes from the music and I express my truth.<sup>58</sup>

Wong’s reluctance to place his musicking in an explicitly politicized space may militate against a visible social impact for it. On the other hand, he may be simply attempting to foreclose a “ghettoization” of his musicking, that is, if his recordings are labeled Asian American jazz the potential to reach a wider jazz audience remains minimal given the situation I have been describing. I also believe Wong wants his musicking to represent more than his political views and his creative work to speak in the broadly expressive ways other musicians are afforded. In fact, perhaps due to an interest in widening the appeal of his musicking, Wong emphasized how diverse the “Asian American experience” can be, declaring,

A lot of times, interviewers want to know the stylistic thing, how to put the music in a bag so that people will buy it. But how we want to express ourselves in our own context in our own vehicle is more about how we want to bring our culture to people in our music. We want to bring a sense of the complexities and subtleties and contradictions of that culture. By saying our culture is not Chinese culture, it’s the culture that we’ve come up with. It’s a very specific set of experiences.<sup>59</sup>

In fact, Wong finds this specificity of expression to be aligned with an African American jazz tradition.

How can I make the saxophone play in my image? Part of it is getting [knowledge] from the masters—certain traditions and sounds. But also, with that sense of control or mastery of the instrument, be able to have come out what’s inside of me. Relating that to some sense of self-empowerment with the instrument.

This is one of the basic messages of the African American masters. Be yourself. Looking at that whole tradition, every player that has come along to develop his individual sound has had to change the instrument or the way the instrument is played in order to be “themselves” with it.<sup>60</sup>

Wong's stance addresses the stereotyping of Asian Americans as noncreative types with a "natural" affinity for technological and/or scientific occupations—a view that, as I have mentioned, forecloses the possibility of recognizable cultural production from Asian Americans. Wong addressed this, admitting,

Another thing that I'm aware of is that not too many people have seen a Chinese American play the saxophone, or play anything besides classical music. . . . I've gone on in situations where people don't think Asian Americans can play this music, or any music. . . . Still, in this society today, when I walk out into a room of white people, or whoever, they haven't heard very much from us as Asian Americans. They haven't seen us do very many things.<sup>61</sup>

This "blindness" to—or what I am calling "silencing"—of Asian Americans in the cultural sphere maintained by scholarly elision and critical reiteration of a line of "great men of jazz" produces public interest in Asian American culture that remains voyeuristically orientalist, a scopophilia that reproduces exoticist fantasy. Being positioned as an exotic object is always the danger of being among the first of a marginalized group to break new ground in mainstream arenas, and Wong and his peers have been willing to traverse uncomfortable new spaces for Asian American artists. However, as I have been arguing, if normalizing Asian American artistic involvement in jazz musicking is to have any value beyond an insipid color-blind democracy in action, not only do ideas about real jazz musicians need to change but ideas about Asian Americans need to undergo a radical rethinking. This is not just a cultural claim but also a political one that registers in the ways Asian American jazz musicians have continued to make claims for artistic legitimacy.

Moreover, there is a linkage between spirituality and politics that Francis Wong, for one, perceives as missing in contemporary political movements. He asserts,

I think that part of the trend of the twentieth century has been the separation of politics and spirituality. Hence you could have political music that lacks spiritual development. You've had politics in the twentieth century—not just in the twentieth century—but certainly in our time there's plenty of politics from the left and the right that lacks spiritual depth.<sup>62</sup>

The lack of spiritual depth in political movements Wong cites is indicative of a chasm between various progressive political and social agendas. Jon Jang is currently a Baptist Christian and stands in stark contrast to the Leninist-Maoist



orientation of Fred Ho, for instance, marking a break not just politically but philosophically. Additionally, Jang sees his more normative Christian practice as another correspondence with African American culture, noting the progressive political, as well as spiritual, role African American churches have performed throughout history.<sup>63</sup>

More important, Jang and Wong state that after the signing of H.R. 442 (the Civil Rights Act of 1988, which allowed for reparations for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II), the Asian American movement

went in one direction, and . . . we founded Asian Improv Arts, a non-profit arts organization in partnership with a non-profit experimental theater company Life on the Water. Life on the Water wasn't Asian but it was experimental and they were very open to working with us and providing resources.<sup>64</sup>

Jang's admission not only indicates his divergence from explicitly politicized work but also how collaboration with non-Asian organizations signaled a growing willingness to move outside strict definitions of what it means to be an Asian American jazz artist. While all Asian American jazz artists collaborate across various racial, ethnic, and national lines, these are usually creative collaborations. Financial "collaborations" engender a different set of concerns, further troubling the demarcation of a space for Asian American jazz.

Similarly, while many of these early Asian American jazz musicians emerged from an avant-garde background, performing and composing free jazz, the ways in which they utilized that background subsequent to the 1980s have seen some important divisions in their various aesthetic approaches. Wong continues to perform in a free jazz idiom, his ability to weld Asian folk songs in this context rooted in a consistent search for an expression of the self and his belief in music's ability to use spiritual means toward political ends. Anthony Brown, while making no public statements about his religious or spiritual beliefs, has continued to look to the now-canonical works of Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, and, in a current project for which he has received a Guggenheim award, George Gershwin, striking a middle ground between the highly politicized jazz musicking of Fred Ho and the emphasis on self-expression that Francis Wong and Jon Jang advocate.

Still, Wong has admitted elsewhere that Asian American jazz and politics were born in a complex relationship. He recalls,

We were trying to be active with our music and trying to identify with the Asian American consciousness movement. It was a very positive period. If it

wasn't for that time we would not have been moved to create a lot of the work in the context that we did, with the content and substance that it had. We wouldn't have been moved to create an organization or vehicle if it wasn't for that political context.<sup>65</sup>

But the contemporary political landscape has changed, and so have his "tactics." He explains that he is now

trying to deal with Chinese American spirituality and how it relates to social action. That's the direction we've gone in the '90s. The revelations about the eastern bloc and the Tiananmen massacre did create a crisis of meaning among people who were trying to make changes in the world. A need to look at other ways of thinking about things. How do you relate as an individual, and how you relate to humanity, has a lot to do with the developments of the work we've been creating since 1992.<sup>66</sup>

Jon Jang concurs, positing that an increased awareness of the global nature of Asian communities, particularly the Chinese diaspora, attenuates some of the purpose of naming a political movement Asian American. He admits that he has shifted from a political focus to a cultural one, insisting that the link between politics and music has "always felt uncomfortable for me."<sup>67</sup>

As I hope is clear, there are definite clefs within this group of "first-wave" Asian American jazz musicians. Normative political activity continues as a focus for some artists while for others spiritual concerns have superseded more prosaic agendas. What, exactly, might these artists say about Asian American identity and the growing fragmentation within the community sensed by Asian American social activists? Is it, as Anthony Brown asserted to me, that while "Asian American cohesion is a myth," it continues to retain political value in the face of a dominant culture that continues, as it does within jazz discourse, to marginalize Asian Americans?

For some, aesthetics and politics have been delinked, as, for instance, when Francis Wong continues to perform free jazz yet offers to transcend political statements through an aesthetic agenda of personal expression or when Anthony Brown seeks to recontextualize canonical works in a political project of self-determination and self-definition. In a brief, and rare, interview in a 2003 *Down Beat* column, Anthony Brown was one of three artists asked who they would choose if they were able to schedule artists for the new Carnegie Hall facility, Zankel Hall.<sup>68</sup> His response addresses the syncretic approach he champions in his self-definition of Asian American jazz.

I'd like to see Carnegie Hall continue its legacy by programming classic music of all genres as well as presenting contemporary expressions of those traditions. . . . I received a Guggenheim Fellowship this year to recompose [George Gershwin's] *Rhapsody in Blue* for a 21-piece intercultural, intergenerational and intergender ensemble, combining Asian instruments and sensibilities with a jazz orchestra. I would love to present this new version reflecting 21st century realities in the U.S. in juxtaposition with a performance of the original version orchestrated by Ferde Grofe for its premier in 1924 by Paul Whiteman's orchestra.<sup>69</sup>

Brown, in his wish to reflect “21st century realities,” seeks to root “contemporary expressions” within “classic traditions.” No longer can one ascertain a given Asian American musician's political beliefs simply by determining which aesthetic camp his or her musicking embraces. In other words, free jazz no longer signifies explicit political activism, nor does the performance of canonical works reveal a reactionary position.<sup>70</sup> But what would Brown's juxtaposition mean for my question: “What is Asian American jazz?”

One way of mapping Brown's wished-for juxtaposition is by noting how critical discourse about jazz authenticity, particularly in its assumptive racialized binarism, is linked to the attempt to mark out a space for jazz's status as an art object rather than folk art, or, worse, a mass cultural commodity, by obscuring the relationship between museum (“autonomous” art) and market (commercial) cultures. As jazz writers began to emphasize jazz musicians' use of complex thematic and harmonic materials, older ideas about primitivist black creation receded before the perception of the jazz musicians as artists involved in projects with markedly modernist tendencies, particularly since the rise of bebop in the late 1940s.<sup>71</sup>

While Brown's juxtaposition seeks to mediate how the American cultural landscape has been transformed by “intercultural, intergenerational and intergender [music] ensembles,” I mean to note again how normative jazz discourse impacts Asian American silencing by instantiating a high-low cultural divide—with jazz inhabiting a liminal status, mixing elements of the museum and the market—that reinforces racialized hierarchies of taste even while arguing for jazz as color-blind democracy in action. To highlight how this operates, I want to turn to the musicking of an Asian American fusion band, Hiroshima, as it further complicates notions of real jazz as well as Asian American jazz. As a telling critical aporia, Bill Shoemaker never mentions this most successful of Asian American jazz bands.<sup>72</sup>

Before I turn to Hiroshima, however, I want to note how this shift from the

explicitly political to the spiritual and cultural for some of these now elder statesmen of Asian American jazz points to the growing fragmentation of an Asian American political project. With a number of immigrant populations unfamiliar with the Asian American struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as a younger generation of Asian Americans that faces a different set of negotiations with the dominant culture, the cultural resonance of a free jazz aesthetic coupled with a highly politicized “identity politics” may no longer be as powerful (in many ways, hip hop artists have inherited much of the cultural capital and progressive political cachet once held by free jazz musicians). There is also a growing sense, as Jang notes, of the global nature of an Asian community and diaspora(s). Moreover, an emergent “hapa” (mixed race) consciousness is supplementing, or even replacing, older categories of ethnic identity internal to the broader Asian American community.

### **Hiroshima: Between Aesthetics and Politics**

While the Asian American jazz artists I have profiled share a common political history (even if it is articulated in quite different ways today), the most successful Asian American musicians in terms of visibility and commercial success—though ignored by critics and scholars—are the members of the fusion group Hiroshima. I would like to take the time to consider Hiroshima at some length, as it is the most successful Asian American musical group, and I hope to broker its elision both in jazz studies and by Asian American scholars. Hiroshima’s less trenchant appeal to Asian American issues does not mean its members are silent about political and cultural issues relevant to the Asian American community. Their albums have no less political resonance—their name speaks to the atomic bombing in World War II and the intertwined historical legacy shared by the United States and Japan—and one must consider the titles of their albums and compositions, the concerns they express in interviews regarding the political and social world around them, and their own reflexivity about their representative role, which is wider, perhaps, than that of any of the other artists in this essay.<sup>73</sup>

More important, it speaks volumes that Hiroshima is the only high-profile Asian American band built around a specifically Asian American aesthetic and yet it has never been the subject of serious and sustained critical investigation. For instance, Hiroshima’s incorporation of Japanese koto, taiko, and shakuhachi as integral components of its “sound” is often ignored. Critics, when they mention the group at all, tend to focus on its status as a “fusion

band” rather than taking seriously, for example, the virtuosity of kotoist June Kuramoto. Yet, while Hiroshima’s commercial success overshadows the struggle for recognition and economic survival of countless other Asian American artists, it remains glaringly absent in discussions of Asian American aesthetics and cultural visibility.<sup>74</sup>

I believe there are reasons for this silence that reach beyond the marginalization experienced by other Asian American jazz artists. Chief among them is Hiroshima’s designation as a fusion band or, worse, a “smooth jazz” or “world music” band. These genres all face critical devaluation, as they are seen as too compliant with bourgeois concerns to resonate with progressive political activity not only by critics and scholars (many of whom do not worry about a musician’s political views) but by other jazz musicians, particularly those profiled above, who perform free or avant-garde jazz.<sup>75</sup> Jang admits that when he was studying at the Oberlin Conservatory, other Asian Americans “valorized Hiroshima, but the music didn’t speak to me. It didn’t have the power or spirituality [I was seeking].”<sup>76</sup> Is Hiroshima merely processing (multi)cultural eclecticism for non-Asian consumption? Or is there something behind the band’s willingness to blend “contemporary root music, mystical Eastern exotica and melodically rich smooth jazz,” as its Web site declares?<sup>77</sup> Is it musical exploration or cultural exploitation? As its Web site also affirms, Hiroshima has a “larger commitment to global unity on the cusp of the new millennium.” Can Hiroshima, then, be more than an exoticized attempt to reach mass audiences with a self-conscious agenda that blends commercial interests, political awareness, and transcultural musicking?

Before discerning whether or not Hiroshima’s aesthetics can be connected to a progressive social agenda, I would like to touch on how the devaluing of fusion bands and musicians has its roots in otherwise antithetical soils. Mainstream critical jazz discourse views any musicking that is performed without acoustic instrumentation, a “swing” rhythmic sense, and an obvious resonance with blues musicking as illegitimate, inauthentic, and simply “not jazz.” While free jazz artists face some of these same critical barbs from mainstream critics (they neither swing nor proffer many blues riffs in their performances, to their detriment according to dominant jazz discourse), free jazz advocates’ criticism of fusion bands rests on more subtle—and elitist—stratagems. The alignment of free or avant-garde jazz with progressive politics, as well as an aesthetic approach more closely mirroring the art music world (although much of what passes for “new” in free jazz even today positions it firmly in the avant-garde scenes of the 1950s and 1960s), allows free jazz apologists to decry fusion’s

willing, even eager, embrace of popular musicking's rhythms, electronic instrumentation, and production techniques. For this reason, Hiroshima, for all the Asian sensibilities it brings to its musicking, fails to achieve the same critical assessment that Jon Jang received for his "Two Flowers on a Stem."

Might some of the criticisms stem from a perception of Dan Kuramoto's assertion—that Asian American culture is "between black and white" instead of a dynamic culture in its own right that can be envisioned as equal to African American and European American culture—as politically naive or even dangerously complaisant with the status quo? Seen in this light, Dan Kuramoto's conception of Asian Americans' positioning implies a passive acceptance that is highly problematic. Dan Kuramoto has publicly expressed how he sees Asian American culture as being "between black and white," the title of Hiroshima's 1999 Windham Hill recording.

We create musically a cross-commentary about a multitude of cultures that comes from our backgrounds as Asian Americans growing up in a racially diverse America. The album title grew from the idea that as people of Japanese heritage, we are ethnically in the middle of black and white, drawing from the traditions of both races yet also creating an identity that is unique to our heritage.<sup>78</sup>

But what does he mean when he accepts the "in the middle of black and white" racial paradigm? What can he mean by the assertion that Japanese Americans "are drawing from the traditions of both [black and white] races"? Is he speaking of Japan or the Asian and U.S. cultural mixture or is he positioning black and white as subordinate and dominant cultural positions? His statement, then, would seem to position Hiroshima's music in a racialized liminal space, quietly celebratory but problematic.

Thought of in another way, however, this positioning allows Kuramoto to remain outside of partisan struggles over authenticity. As a hybrid subject, Kuramoto's claim about how Hiroshima's fusion is "bridging cultures and music . . . with our message of peace and multiculturalism"<sup>79</sup> acts as a way of destabilizing the black-white binarism of not only jazz criticism but also public discourse about American racial politics. In this light, Kuramoto's elaboration positions Asian American culture and identity as disturbing the crudely conceived racialized dialectic between black and white. He continues,

*Between Black and White* is not only a natural reflection about being in the middle, it's also a perfect metaphor for the subtleties of grays in everyday life, moderation and balance summed up in the Yin and Yang ideas of Eastern philosophy.<sup>80</sup>

Hiroshima's ability to create music that appeals to mainstream audiences yet promotes values such as "peace and multiculturalism" may seem contradictory to the avant-gardists profiled earlier in this piece. Jang's comment about the group's music lacking "power and spirituality" speaks to this antagonism. Yet, as a counterexample of the easy conflation of commercial success and political acquiescence to dominant values, June Kuramoto insists that

there were times when, in all honesty, you might think of quitting, when times get hard, the business gets hard, whatever the situation, and yet [well-known jazz artists such as the pianist Chick Corea] told us we can't quit. We owe it to our community, our people, our culture, ourselves and for everyone, to continue . . . which is pretty heavy.<sup>81</sup>

Hiroshima's sense of connection to its community also drives a strong social awareness, and Dan Kuramoto emphasized this in the same interview with Baldwin Smith.

We did the Isley Brothers—we did "Caravan of Love" because those are the messages that people have forgotten. . . . It is a song about brotherhood. It's the kind of thing that June talked about growing up with, like Marvin Gaye and people like that, whose message was, we need to bring people together. With 9/11 and the madness of war that's going on, we thought it was really important to make that statement. And so that's why we went back and tried to find the songs that did it for us and that song of brotherhood to us is really key.<sup>82</sup>

Why is Francis Wong's desire to seek a spiritual connection to a progressive political agenda received so differently than Dan Kuramoto's similar ambitions? Does commercial success necessarily compromise artistic and political integrity? While I would be extremely wary of drawing a direct correlation between commercial success and the lack of a progressive social vision, it is almost a truism in the aesthetic discourses surrounding popular culture that to be too popular is to be politically or spiritually compromised. The "underground," as opposed to the "top of the charts," serves as a site of authenticity and/or radical political orientation for some, and to sell well is to sell out.<sup>83</sup> However, I think we should take seriously Dan Kuramoto's assertion that he is affected by social situations and seeks to address them in his musicking. As he told an interviewer, Paula Edelstein,

I'm also very much influenced by the times and the people around me. On [Hiroshima's newest release] *The Bridge*, the song "Manzanar" (which I co-wrote

with June [Kuramoto]) was influenced by the whole epoch of World War II and all the Japanese-Americans being imprisoned for no reason. The direct inspiration was a story my mother told me about how strange it was to be an American one day, and then to be treated like an enemy the next. To be forcibly evacuated to a desolate place in the desert, to live behind barbed wire—and to hear the mournful wind at night. The song starts with me trying to replicate the sound of that wind on my shakuhachi, and then weaves the sound of the koto into those nights.<sup>84</sup>

Here he not only indicates a politicized aesthetic but addresses Brown's definitional criteria for "Asian American jazz," namely, Asian American musicians using Asian instrumentation in "traditional yet malleable" ways—clearly demonstrated by June Kuramoto's classical koto pedigree coupled with her willingness to perform in a modern fusion band—and the reflection of Asian American sensibilities as evidenced by Dan Kuramoto's statements. Moreover, Hiroshima's album, *LA* (Qwest, 1994), was released in the hopes of utilizing music to "heal the wounds and try to bridge peoples' differences" after the so-called Los Angeles riots.<sup>85</sup> The song "One World," uses a blend of genres (jazz, rhythm and blues, rock, Latin, and traditional Japanese music) in order to signify the unification of various ethnic groups, ironically positing the music industry's racialized genre schematic against itself. Hiroshima's positioning of traditional Asian musicking not as a static repertoire of gestures but as a dynamic source of soundings interacting with jazz and rhythm and blues (R&B) elements integrates seemingly disparate musical elements into a unifying vision. Dan Kuramoto affirms this aesthetic rationale, insisting,

Some people say we're different, we're weird. Record labels have told us for 25 years we don't fit in anywhere, necessarily. There's no bin in the record store that makes sense for us. We're jazz, but we're not. We are world music, but we're not. We're rock, but we're not. We're R&B, but we're not. If you grow up on the Pacific coast, you get everything. If you grow up in Los Angeles, you're exposed to everything all the time. We took our background as Japanese Americans and we started to bring things together, and it's always a journey.<sup>86</sup>

Or, as he explains the choice of the photograph that graces the cover of the band's latest release, *The Bridge* (Heads Up, 2003),

That's why the CD cover is a picture of the First Street Bridge in Los Angeles[; it] connects East Los Angeles, which is the main immigrant community, with downtown, where everybody goes to work. My dad used to drive that every day when he went to his gas station. I have all these cultures in me that created the music that we do.<sup>87</sup>



The recognition of Asian American social realities is the same for the members of Hiroshima as it is for the other jazz artists profiled here (Brown, Ho, Izu, Jang, and Wong), but their status as members of a fusion band and their enormous commercial success preclude them from a serious engagement by critics and scholars. This silencing is, in some significant ways, detrimental to the larger project of “making audible” the musicking of Asian American jazz artists. For instance, the high-profile engagements (e.g., the Playboy Jazz Festival) Hiroshima is able to acquire provide a much higher plateau from which to evaluate Asian American musicking in general, but the band’s “exceptionalism,” while speaking to Asian American cultural disenfranchisement writ large, is undermined by critical neglect or dismissal. Hiroshima, in many ways, can provide an entry point for subsequent Asian American artists to “become audible,” yet the critical focus on Asian American jazz musicians whose aesthetic choices tend toward either the avant-garde or a somewhat exoticized “mainstream” places restrictions on the public perception of Asian American jazz musicking. Audiences that think of Asian American jazz and avant-garde as coeval and not simply one element in a large spectrum of jazz musicking by Asian Americans limit Asian American creativity (again note Bill Shoemaker’s focus on free jazz musicians).

Finally, Hiroshima challenges racialized conceptions of music genres by utilizing a syncretic approach to its musicking. The band members’ focus on synthesizing or fusing various types of music in order to present “another place” (the title of their 1985 Epic recording) articulates a fundamental shift in the racial politics at the heart of critical jazz discourse. As there is no space for Asian American jazz artists in normative terms, the search for another place takes on not a utopic sensibility but rather an acknowledgment of the need to move “beyond black and white,” blurring the definitions that support and instantiate a black-white binarism inherent in such an articulation and “graying” the space between black and white. This graying—or blurring—recognizes the difference in terms of both power relationships, heard in the highlighting of the koto alongside the saxophone, as well as the fact that Hiroshima has “no bin of its own” in retail record stores.

Hiroshima ably sifts through a wide spectrum of musical traditions while pushing them toward new soundings. Insisting on performing multicultural fusion, Hiroshima opens the door to the possibilities such a cross- and trans-cultural movement has for sound artists today and in the future. It performs, through the use of a diverse array of Asian instrumentation, a syncretic blend of Asian, Latin, and African American musicking, and a willingness to risk

artistic criticism and even critical alienation in the arguably more populist desire to reach a broad audience.

The band's success also points to the broad affective resonance its particular blend of Asian and "American" musicking evokes, which more explicitly political Asian American musicians choose to ignore or denigrate. Jon Jang's cross-cultural musicking, for all its high cultural cachet (as evidenced by arts council commissions and the like), fails to resonate with a broad public. This "failure" is read as an asset for Jang by many critics and scholars, who see Hiroshima's commercial success as a liability.<sup>88</sup> The public may be the better judge in terms of sensing the promise of a sounding out of another place beyond the black-white racial binary, as well as recognizing that difference and respect need not be mutually exclusive.

### Conclusion: The Many Faces of Asian American Jazz

The encounter between Asian American jazz musicians and normative critical discourse (popular and scholarly) ranges, as we have seen, from Brown's proactive engagements with self-definition to Wong's active efforts to position his cultural work within a broader framework than the label "Asian American jazz" might indicate in the present social and cultural atmosphere. Ho, on the other hand, actively embraces "an Afro Asian new American multicultural music,"<sup>89</sup> seeking not to privilege any racialized notion of musical aesthetics but formulating an egalitarian approach through a broad dialectic between each signifier in his self-described multicultural music. Hiroshima fuses contemporary rhythms with ancient instruments, respectful of tradition yet energizing them with modern production techniques and aesthetic sensibilities.

While I have been concentrating on the "first wave" of Asian American jazz artists, artists such as Toshiko Akiyoshi have been integrating Asian musicking with jazz for quite some time. Her first RCA releases in the early 1970s preceded those of Wong, Ho, and Brown in her use of the Japanese shakuhachi, Noh singing, and other Asian instrumentation and musical practices. Akiyoshi's 2001 BMG recording, *Monopoly Game*, featured Miya Masaoka on koto, linking the two generations of musicians.<sup>90</sup>

A number of young musicians, such as the pianist Vijay Iyer, who has produced avant-garde works that utilize South Asian musicking as well as "new music" aesthetics, and the Filipina drummer Susie Ibarra, who is actively involved in improvised "new music" groups, have also emerged, contesting, in some ways, the older generation's ideas about the relationship between Asian

Americans and jazz. On her album *Songbird Suite* (2002), Ibarra highlights the ways in which “tradition” and “modernity” merge in nonoppositional ways with her use of non-Western drums alongside Ikue Mori’s computer manipulations. Iyer’s recordings, particularly *Blood Sutra* (2003) and *In What Language?* (2003), display a sensitivity to both global routes and personal roots, questioning the displacement of either in any effort to locate a particular musician’s aesthetic and political concerns. The pianist and keyboardist Hiromi Uehara, born in Japan but currently based in the United States, performs an eclectic program of self-penned compositions ranging from stride piano to fusion, straight ahead jazz, and experimental musicking. Her eclecticism is indicative of young artists whose musical visions correspond to new ways of representing and expressing contemporary Asian American positionalities.

The spectrum of attitudes toward Asian American jazz that these artists voice across generations, aesthetics, and political perspectives indicates the expansive range of ideas that reflect and express the wide differentiation within the space demarcated Asian America. As Fred Ho asserts, “The failure of the discussion of race in jazz stems from an ideological conservatism that only sees color and race, one that does not really understand that the very concept of America is one of hybridity and multiple identities.”<sup>91</sup> Ho’s assertion underlines my nondefinitive answer to the question, “Is there such a thing as Asian American jazz?” Obviously, the movement involved in Asian American jazz across cultural and ethnic lines is more complex and multivalent than either unalloyed celebration of ethnic fraternalism or pessimistic perspectives about the status of Asian Americans allow.

With the presentation of Anthony Brown’s music in one of the concerts presented under the 2001 San Francisco Jazz Festival banner, the sensibilities of Asian American jazz musicians may be gaining wider acceptance. If the applause at the end of Brown’s set is any indication, there is an audience ready to recognize the efforts of Asian American jazz artists, even if normal circuits of music production and distribution seem deaf to Asian American jazz.<sup>92</sup>

Asian American jazz enunciates the tenuous relationships both back in time and space toward former patterns of immigration and forward in time to as yet unrealized social and political equalities yet embedded in present relationships of unequal power and normative racialized conceptions of jazz musicking, Americanness, and Asianness. As the musicking—however named—performed by Anthony Brown, Francis Wong, the members of Hiroshima, and other Asian American jazz musicians attests (whether publicly identifying with the moniker or not), the movement toward acceptance of their art is not

only the recognition of their aesthetic value but also an indication of a broader recognition of the unique qualities that the cultural work of Asian Americans possesses due to their distinctive position in American cultural and political life. Moreover, as their different views about the label Asian American jazz imply, the “Asian American experience” is a highly contested space that inhabits the politically salient efforts to formulate a pan-Asian identity. In other words, there is no single answer to the question “Is there such a thing as “Asian American jazz”?” as Asian American jazz musicians will contradict any strict definitional guidelines, especially through racial or ethnically determined parameters.

As David Palumbo-Liu attests,

Modern Asian America should be read within a context of multiple subjectivities whose multiplicity can be depathologized through a close and critical reading of Asian, American, and Asian / American history, and that the unity presumed to be enjoyed by “America” is in fact better read as a set of adjustments and reformations that disclose the fact that America is always in a process itself. And a large part of this process in the twentieth century has particularly involved Asian America.<sup>93</sup>

In looking at Asian American jazz, one encounters the same multiple subjectivities that Palumbo-Liu describes while also engaging the historical aporia that Asian American jazz inhabits. Asian American jazz has only operated as such since the 1970s, when Mark Izu, Francis Wong, Fred Ho, and Jon Jang, among others, began to coalesce around their interest in jazz—particularly free jazz—and their political awakenings regarding an Asian American cultural heritage. Asian American jazz, especially as it moves throughout the globe, anticipates as well as generates the tensions that lie between pan-Asian sensibilities and the heterogeneous makeup of Asian America by sounding out various grapplings within that tension. By positioning their musicking in a jazz context, Asian American artists not only transform jazz but also introduce a new way of musicking that addresses Asian American issues and perspectives. In doing so, Asian American jazz musicking “makes audible” the silencing that has attempted to keep Asian American jazz musicians mute.

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## Notes

- 1 A clip of her appearance can be seen in a film documentary about Akiyoshi entitled *Jazz Is My Native Language* (dir. Renée Cho, Counterpoint, 1983).
- 2 There have been brief mentions of Asian American jazz artists in mainstream popular jazz magazines. I will quote later from a *Down Beat* article about the jazz band United Front. There have also been a handful of recording and concert reviews, but there have been no feature articles, nor has there been a cover story on an Asian American musician or band in any major jazz publication.

See, for instance, Adam Shatz's article, "New Seekers in Jazz Look to the East," where, after quoting a dour comment by the South Asian American pianist Vijay Iyer to the effect that the music industry "just doesn't know how to shop around black music played by someone like me," he optimistically predicts that as "the Asian-American jazz scene blossoms, it could well become as hard to ignore as today's Asian-American literary renaissance." Unfortunately, the events of the years since his prediction have not borne this out.
- 3 Shoemaker, "East Meets Left," 83.
- 4 Unfortunately, I am also leaving out a large number of Asian American jazz artists, including, but certainly not limited to, the drummer Akira Tana; bassist Steven Hashimoto; pianists Flip Nunez and Glenn Horiuchi; saxophonists Rudresh Mahanthappa, Melecio Magdaluyo, and Hafez Modirzadeh; trumpeter John Worley; and violinist Jason Hwang. This essay focuses on Asian American musicians located primarily on the West Coast of the United States. There is a vibrant Asian American jazz scene in Chicago, for instance, as well as Asian American jazz musicians throughout the United States, who I am unable to give more attention here.
- 5 Shoemaker, "East Meets Left," 83. Shoemaker also notes that in 2001 Asian American jazz musicians were absent from a three-day symposium sponsored by San Francisco Jazz entitled "Jazz and Race: Black, White, and Beyond." I attended on all three days and was also distressed to note the absence of any discussion of the "beyond" category. One participant, Angela Davis, attempted to address Latin and female jazz artists, but in each instance her comments received no response from the other participants.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 7 *Canon* in jazz discourse refers to a core repertoire reflecting as well as obscuring the critical positionality and biases of its builders, similar to other critical discourses. Jazz critics and scholars debate various inclusions and exclusions to this core repertoire, but it can be loosely defined here as the popular songs of Broadway shows and Tin Pan Alley (also known as "jazz standards"), as well as the compositions of central jazz figures such as Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (notably a majority of these artists date from the swing era of jazz, ca. 1930–45). A sizable minority of critics would also include popular music composers who have

arguably continued the songwriting traditions of Tin Pan Alley in contemporary terms, such as Henry Mancini and Burt Bacharach. Still others might include non-U.S. songwriters such as the bossa nova artist Antonio Carlos Jobim. As one can readily see from this short list, the jazz canon, like its literary brethren, is an elusive creation.

- 8 *Musicking* is a term I borrow from Christopher Small, who defined his neologism as a way of indicating how music is an activity (composition, performance, and audience participation in terms of listening and critical analysis) as opposed to its reification, especially in terms of notation and recorded objects (compact discs, cassette tapes, etc.). See his *Musicking*.
- 9 Clive Davis, describing jazz's inclusion at Lincoln Center, pronounced it "an indigenous classical music" ("Classical Jazz," 60). See also Sales, *Jazz*; and Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, for similar assignations that support the idea that jazz is an "indigenous" American (and, for Murray, African American) music capable of sharing the "art space" of the European concert music tradition.
- 10 Ansermet, "Bechet and Jazz Visit Europe, 1919," 742. Pointedly, Ansermet made no mention of the fact that Bechet was a "Creole of color," a racialized position that also complicates a simple black and white binary.
- 11 Hodeir, *Jazz*, 241. André Hodeir's seminal text laid the foundation for normative jazz historiography, and many of his ideas (e.g., his analysis of jazz through "objective" musicological methodology) became the basis for "modern" jazz criticism. Hugues Panassié's *The Real Jazz*, as its title suggests, sought to demarcate "real jazz" and built its argument through a line of "great men of jazz." Gunther Schuller's *Early Jazz* and *The Swing Era* are both notable for bringing a stringent musicological analysis to argue for jazz's status as a music tradition on a par with European concert music. While laudable, Schuller's reliance on a series of great men (all African or European Americans) and his teleological bias toward jazz history, make his contributions problematic. Moreover, he has been criticized for wielding musicological tools forged in analyses of European concert music that are insufficient for appraising African American music.
- 12 DeVaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 529, emphasis mine.
- 13 Lees, *Cats of Any Color*, 246.
- 14 See Richard Sudhalter's *Lost Chords* for an example of a writer arguing for white male inclusion in histories of early jazz formation. Sudhalter struggles to demarcate a space for early white jazz musicians, countering what he calls "the black canon" (xvii). His misguided attempts to carve out such a space reveal the contentious field called jazz history.

Race has been a major theme throughout the history of jazz with writers commenting on its racial dynamics from its early years. *Reading Jazz*, edited by Robert Gottlieb, provides a survey of early writings on jazz, as does Andrew Clark's *Riffs and Choruses*. See also, LeRoi Jones's *Blues People* and *Black Music*; Gene Lees's *Cats of Any Color*; and Jon Pannish's *The Color of Jazz*. There are numerous others, but my point is that jazz is often written about in black and white masculinist terms, excluding women and musicians who are neither "white" nor

“black.” I might add that Pannish’s book is a nuanced counter to much of the racial politics found in jazz writings, though he, too, concentrates on a black and white jazz world.

See Sherrie Tucker’s *Swing Shift* for an important investigation into how gender and sexuality operated in popular jazz discourse during the 1940s. Unfortunately, many of her insights can be used to illustrate the continued patriarchal bent of contemporary jazz discourse. Tucker also ruptures the black-white binary by introducing the saxophonist Willie Mae Wong and cogently describing the liminal space between black and white that she inhabited.

While I view with some amount of incredulity Sudhalter’s discursive intervention into the “black canon” with his project of demarcating a space for white musicians, particularly in the early formation of jazz, I do not desire to enter into the polemics surrounding the black and white racialization of jazz discourse; rather, I hope to break the black and white binarism that has overshadowed much of jazz discourse by opening up a space for Asian American musicians and their contributions to jazz musicking. I do not wish to merely perform an “additive” history to the normative jazz historical project, either. This essay is not meant to provide a broad, revisionist history, although it may be aligned with such a project.

- 15 DeVeaux, “What Did We Do to Be So Black and Blue?” 415, emphasis mine.
- 16 An essay by Mia Tuan, “On Asian American Ice Queens and Multigeneration Asian Ethics,” investigates the “forever alien” status of Asian Americans through the ways Michelle Kwan and Kristi Yamaguchi were publicly figured in contrast to their white counterparts. For instance, Tuan begins her article with this telling anecdote: “I was working at my computer . . . when I first heard the news. The internet headline read, ‘American beats Kwan,’ a reference to Tara Lipinski beating out Michelle Kwan for the 1998 Olympic gold medal in women’s figure skating. . . . The faux pas on MSNBC’s part (both skaters, after all, are American—Michelle is second generation) illustrated so well . . . how deep the foreigner stereotype runs—Americans look like Tara, while foreigners look like Michelle” (181).
- 17 I recognize that other Asian male representations may speak to more masculinist perspectives. There is the Fu Manchu stereotype of the power-obsessed Asian male, as well as the skillful martial artist whose physicality is embodied in highly masculinized ways. However, both of these representative tropes place these males in an Asian location that is farther away (in temporal as well as spatial terms) than, for example, the Charlie Chan image, whose marginalization requires other discursive tactics.
- 18 David Ake describes these tendencies as a sense of competitiveness among jazz musicians that privileges an ability to “play faster, higher and louder while incorporating more intricate lines and complex harmonic substitutions than their adversaries did,” noting that “as far back as the early New Orleans innovators, jazz musicians remained highly conscious of displaying a hearty and unambiguous heterosexual masculinity” (*Jazz Cultures*, 67). Noted jazz scholar Krin Gabbard, discussing the signifyin(g) tropes surrounding the jazz trumpet player, writes,

Louis Armstrong was only the first of many African American jazz artists to attract international attention by establishing phallic authority with that most piercing of instruments, the trumpet. Dizzy Gillespie, a celebrated musical descendant of Armstrong who frequently spoke of the “virility” of black jazz, may have been Signifyin(g) on the phallic nature of his instrument when he bent the bell upward as if to simulate an erection. (“Signifyin(g) the Phallus,” 105)

The feminization or emasculation of Asian American males is a subject that I can only briefly touch on here, but it is evidenced in media representations such as the nerdy geek whose social inhibitions provide comic bathos to many film narratives. Or think of the Chinese laundryman whose occupation, once gendered notions regarding domestic labor became naturalized, emasculated him, as Robert G. Lee points out in a short conclusion to the chapter “Third Sex” in his book *Orientalism*.

My main point here is to establish how both musicians and scholars have normalized heterosexual masculinity in jazz musicking, foreclosing the possibility that musicians external to such a construct will be heard as real jazz musicians.

Asian American female musicians, moreover, confronting the submissive female stereotype that is antithetical to normative constructions of the jazz artist, also remain external to normative jazz discourse. I am thinking here of dominant cultural representations of Asian females, particularly in popular culture. Laura Hyun Yi Kang’s “The Desiring of Asian Female Bodies,” confronts this issue in a close reading of the film *Come See the Paradise*.

For instance, the cover photograph on *The Tokyo Blues* album by the pianist Horace Silver (1962) shows him sitting uncomfortably between two Japanese women in kimonos, suggesting once again the discursive opposition between American jazz musicians and exotic Asian women. Further, composition titles on the album such as “Sayonara Blues,” “Cherry Blossom,” and “Ah! So” contribute to dominant projections of Asian exoticism back into the popular imaginary, underlining my argument regarding the vast distance jazz discourse has created between “American” jazz and Asia(ns). The musicologist Ingrid Monson addresses this issue, writing,

The symbolic intersection of masculinity, music, and race perhaps explains the persistence of jazz as a fraternity of predominantly male musicians. While many women have successfully crossed the gender barrier, many cite their technical musical prowess as having compensated for the symbolic liability of their gender. Mary Lou Williams, for example, has remarked, “You’ve got to play, that’s all. They don’t think of you as a woman if you can really play.” (“The Problem with White Hipness,” 405)

The overlapping strains of race and gender reveal a discursive project antithetical to the inclusion of nonblacks, nonwhites, and “nonmales” as real jazz musicians. Williams’s willingness to erase her gender, subsumed under the sign of virtuosity, pointedly reveals the way in which she recognized the stakes at play in the jazz world.



- 19 For a closer examination of this issue, see Timothy P. Fong's *The Contemporary Asian American Experience*; and the anthology *A Look beyond the Model Minority Image*, edited by Grace Yun. See also Lee's *Orientalism*, particularly the chapters "The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority" and "The Model Minority as Gook."
- 20 As noted elsewhere in this essay, other nonwhite and nonblack groups, such as Latin musicians, while clearly subordinate to black and white jazz musicians in dominant jazz discourse, can be heard as legitimate jazz musicians.
- 21 Wong, "The Asian American Body in Performance," 67–68.
- 22 As this essay is concentrating on Asian American musicians, I will not spend time on Asian jazz musicians such as the Japanese trumpeter Terumasa Hino, the Filipino alto saxophonist Tots Tolentino, the Korean tenor saxophonist Lee Jung Shik, or groups such as Shakti (whose members include the well-known South Asian Indian musician Zakir Hussain), the Japanese fusion band Casiopea, and the internationally known smooth jazz artist Keiko Matsui.
- 23 The sites I mention are "origin spaces" for different developments in normative jazz history, and I am using them here somewhat ironically. In formal musical terms, jazz has also managed to incorporate a broad range of nonjazz musicking, including atonality, the use of "extended techniques," and even elements of aleatorism, without completely becoming another type of musicking. Jazz musicians' expansive ability to retain "jazzness" in their musicking, however, is not always compatible with critical or scholarly discourse.
- 24 I understand the reasons why African American scholars and artists would support a historiographical project that valorizes the accomplishments of African American jazz musicians and their notable contributions to world culture, and I fully support the recognition of those artists and their creative work. I find the exclusion of Asian American jazz musicians problematic, however, for the reasons I outline in the text.
- 25 I use the term *Brown Pacific* in reference to Paul Gilroy's naming of Afro-diasporic musicking in his *Black Atlantic*. I used the term in an unpublished paper, "Chants for Change: The Music of Sudden Rush and Hawai'ian Sovereignty," as a way of describing the diasporic musicking of Hawai'ian rap artists in their engagements with Afro-diasporic musicking as expressed in hip hop and reggae. I also mean to draw attention to the diasporic nature of Asian American jazz.
- 26 Francis Wong, interview with the author, October 4, 2001.
- 27 As one of many examples in George Yoshida's *Reminiscing in Swing Time* to attest to this situation, tenor saxophonist Masao Manbo articulates the tension of occupying this position.

After the day's show . . . a kid—a solitary schoolboy in a somber black uniform—approached me as I was leaving the theater, thrust out an autograph book and said in good English, "May I have your signature?" I signed with a flourish for my only fan, adding "Hollywood, Calif." after my name. I had lived in the movie capital before coming to Japan and was proud of it. But I didn't want to return there to my old occupation, which meant pushing a lawn mower. (108)

- Clearly, the employment options in Japan were greater for Asian American musicians than in the United States—and the “glamour” attached to American citizenship granted these musicians some additional cultural capital in their new home.
- 28 For a compelling historical investigation of jazz in Japan, see E. Taylor Atkins’s *Blue Nippon*. While concentrating on Japan, Atkins also reveals the impact of Japanese Americans on the formation of jazz musicking there. He also takes a look at the provocative maneuvers Japanese jazz artists have used in order to formulate “Japanese jazz.” Even more central to this article, however, are the many instances of Japanese artists, especially before the 1970s, making claims for their own authenticity as jazz musicians in relation to their firsthand access to American jazz artists, particularly African Americans.
  - 29 More work needs to be done in unveiling the ways in which Filipino musicians fashioned “western” musical idioms into expressive mediums of their own. One also sees this in other Asian countries, particularly with hip hop culture in the contemporary moment, but there is a long history of this activity that deserves recognition.
  - 30 Interview with the author, 4 October 2001.
  - 31 I realize I am using problematic categories here that deserve more scrutiny than I can provide in this essay, but I deploy them as shorthand descriptions, begging the reader’s indulgence.
  - 32 Quoted in Hutnyk, “Hybridity Saves?”
  - 33 Gonzalo Rubalcaba is a Cuban pianist who has recorded for Blue Note, a prestigious jazz recording company, and received a substantial amount of critical praise. Django Reinhardt is an iconic figure in jazz. A Gypsy guitarist who eventually became a highly esteemed jazz guitarist, despite the mutilation of his left hand in a fire, Reinhardt formed a legendary quintet with violinist Stephane Grappelli in the 1930s in Paris. His status as a non-American jazz artist provided the origin story for Gypsy jazz. Jon Jang is a Chinese American pianist who has performed with the legendary African American drummer Max Roach, as well as many other well-known jazz musicians, yet remains relatively unknown to the general jazz public. Bassist Mark Izu is a Japanese American who was, as a member of United Front, one of the first explicitly Asian American jazz musicians. He continues to pursue cross-cultural musicking with Asian musicians such as the tabla master Zakir Hussain and gagaku (Japanese art music) master Togi Suenobu. Yet Izu remains even less well known than Jang to the average jazz aficionado.
  - 34 There is documentation suggesting that Asian musicians engaged with American popular music prior to the 1920s. See Yoshida, *Reminiscing in Swingtime*, particularly the first chapter.
  - 35 While there are many approaches one can take to “jazzing” an Asian folk song, there are generally two main ones. The first is to state the folk melody with jazz instrumentation in place of traditional instruments and/or reharmonizing the melodic theme with “jazz harmonies” (extended harmonies as well as “blue” so-

norities, for example). The second method uses traditional Asian instruments within harmonic and rhythmic movement idiomatically identified with jazz musicking. The primary approach, however, is most like the first, which consists of a jazz rhythm (swing or some sort of Western dance rhythm, i.e., foxtrot, waltz, etc.) attached to an Asian melody performed with Western instrumentation. The primary function for early fusions of this sort was the performance of dance music, while contemporary fusions tend to downplay this aspect of jazz musicking.

- 36 Interview with the author, October 4, 2001.
- 37 For a recent exception, see Jones, *Yellow Music*. Chinese music, Jones explains, was initially “denied the epistemological status of music” (19) by Western commentators. His concern to “trace the contours of the trajectory through which Chinese music entered into a relationship of commensurability with that of the West” (20) corresponds to my attempt in this essay to illuminate a similar relationship between Asian American jazz musicians and normative jazz discourse.
- 38 Andrew Jones, in *Yellow Music*, attests to substantial sales of jazzed Chinese songs, if only in Asia. Circuits of distribution and sales, however, also run along racialized sensibilities, and such recordings’ marketability was thought to be constrained by language and other cultural concerns. Are audiences and culture industry perspectives different today? What, for instance, does the popularity of so-called J pop (Japanese popular music) with non-Japanese-speaking audiences indicate?
- 39 Interview with the author, October 4, 2001.
- 40 There is every reason to celebrate African American musicking and its consideration as one of the United States’ primary contributions to world culture. Black culture’s hard-won status as a culture is noteworthy for the overcoming of racism and racist laws, ideological constraints, and social disparagements. However, as I hope to make evident in the body of the text, if jazz’s cultural position comes with its own set of exclusionary practices, particularly those aligned with a black-white binarism, it comes at too high a price. Moreover, Asian American inclusion does not dilute African American creativity, nor does it work to keep African American artists from their much-deserved compensation (similar arguments were used by capitalists to prevent cross-racial union organizing in industrial workplaces). Rather, Asian American exclusion demonstrates how the culture industry, in demarcating markets racially, notes, among other things, the small population of Asian Americans and targets their interests accordingly. The ideology of a culturally inferior race—at least when it comes to jazz musicking—works to support the economic development of markets away from such groups. Additionally, as a group marked “forever alien,” Asian Americans are foreclosed from participating in “America’s classical music.” Again, this orientalist construct, created for entirely other purposes, has been shaped to accommodate the culture industry’s unique requirements. Audience reception, while not entirely determined by the culture industry, feeds from the same ideological trough that the advertising and publicity juggernauts exploit. In Asian American terms, their exoticized positionality is re-

inforced by popular culture imagery, film depictions, and other narrative (mis)representations. Mainstream audience apathy toward Asian Americans who do not resemble these (mis)representations, then, should not be surprising.

- 41 Oliver Wang notes how popular music discourse is formulated in such a way that Asian Americans are silenced in his “Between the Notes.” He describes exceptions, such as vocalist Pat Suzuki, in the popular music culture of the early 1960s while noting the difficulty in contextualizing her “exceptional” status. His article, in seeking to describe a historical genealogy for Asian American popular musicking, concentrates on music consumption rather than production. However, it is important to keep in mind his admonition that “Asian American music, like Asian America itself, comes about from the willful effort of people to imagine new spaces of being, new ways of living” (463).
- 42 For more on the formation of a pan-Asian identity, see Pei-Te Lien’s *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation* and Yen Le Espiritu’s *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. There is also a sizable amount of reportage on the links between African American social movements and the ways they modeled protest and progressive politics in the 1960s and 1970s for Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and others. Those links are even recognized in popular culture, as evidenced in *A* magazine’s 1999 feature article “Common Ground” by Jungwon Kim.
- 43 Jon Jang and Francis Wong, interview with Nic Paget-Clarke, 1997.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Auerbach, “Profile,” 46.
- 47 Interview with Nic Paget-Clarke, 1997.
- 48 See Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, for an overview of many of these struggles and individuals. For a look at the Asian American movement in the period under discussion at this point in the essay (1970s and 1980s), as well as examinations of current Asian American struggles, see Ho et al., *Legacy to Liberation*.
- 49 Jang, “88 Keys to Revolution,” 35.
- 50 Ibid., 35. I would also like to note that political activity and musicking have a longer history in Asian American life than might be ascertained from this essay. Folksingers such as William David “Charlie” Chin and folk groups such as A Grain of Sand and Yokohama, California, predate the Asian American jazz movement by a decade or more.
- 51 The history of Western musicians finding inspiration in Asian musicking deserves its own book, but I will just mention briefly that in the art music world composers such as Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison were inspired by Indonesian gamelan and Japanese gagaku, as well as Native American musicking traditions. In the popular music world, musicians such as Martin Denny and Alfred Apaka drew on non-Western musicking—albeit problematic and crude notions of it—but were not taken seriously by critics or jazz musicians due, in large part, to the highly commercialized strain of their musicking.

- 52 All of the quotes attributed to Anthony Brown come from an interview with the author, conducted on December 19, 2001, unless otherwise noted.
- 53 I would like to remind the reader that John Coltrane's affinity and exploration of South Asian musicking predates the Asian American jazz movement. There are other Asian-jazz fusions such as Joe Harriott's 1966 Atlantic recordings *Indo-Jazz Suite* and *Indo Jazz Fusions*. The drummer Buddy Rich recorded an album with tabla master Alla Rakha, *Rich à la Rakha*, for Liberty Records in 1968. There are other examples, but my point is that jazz artists had been "looking East" for some time before Asian Americans began to think of themselves as Asian American jazz musicians rather than simply jazz musicians who happen to be Asian American.
- 54 Ho, "Beyond Asian American Jazz," 45.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 57 Asian Improv Records was founded by Jon Jang and Francis Wong to produce Jang's early recordings. It later became a nonprofit organization devoted to promoting Asian American musicians in a wide range of genres.
- 58 Interview with the author, 4 October 2001.
- 59 Interview with Nic Paget-Clarke, 1997, n.p., emphasis added.
- 60 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
- 61 *Ibid.* One can also point to the orientalist (mis)representations in film and television that feature, for example, exoticized and hypersexualized female Asians and emasculated Asian males or, conversely, submissive females and/or hypermasculinized martial arts fighting machines. At any rate, none of these figures are able to provide images worthy of the title cultural worker or artist.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 See Jang's and Wong's comments on this topic in *ibid.*
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 *Ibid.*
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 *Ibid.*
- 68 Ouellette, "The Question Is . . ." Notably, Brown was the only artist without a photograph accompanying his brief statement.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 70 Free jazz's discursive connections to black nationalist politics have linked it to activist political sensibilities and have often been counterposed to mainstream jazz musicking. This opposition is often framed within a progressive-reactionary binarism, but, as is noted with regard to Asian American jazz, it is an outdated connection that may have only tentative historical veracity. For a reading of free jazz's politics that complicates this simple conflation, see Anderson, "Jazz Outside the Marketplace." It should also be noted that a revisioning of a particular jazz composition is not necessarily going to reflect a progressive sensibility, for one of jazz's dominant aesthetic suppositions is the creative reworking of given materials

and jazz artists of every political stripe are compelled to “reinvent tradition” in some fashion.

- 71 See DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, for a complication of the notion that bebop musicians were simply seeking art status for their musicking. DeVeaux argues that beboppers were also savvy about placing their musicking in new market spaces for jazz, especially as jazz became less popular in mass audience terms than it had been during the immediately previous swing era.
- 72 There are jazz writers, critics, and scholars who ignore Hiroshima on the grounds that fusion is not real jazz, and I do not mean to tackle that debate here. I do not know what Shoemaker’s reasons were for Hiroshima’s exclusion—or if, indeed, it was an editorial decision in which he had little input—but it remains an interesting “moment of silence.”
- 73 For instance, the cover of their eponymously titled debut recording features a photograph of a female Noh mask on a gray beach with the eyes and lips blackened, a sneer or growl beginning to form. The eyes have slit irises, like those of a cat, further adding to the ominous character of the mask. A bright red ribbon, like blood, spills from the mask onto the otherwise black- and gray-toned photograph. The photograph, with only the word *Hiroshima* in the upper-left-hand corner, evokes a postapocalyptic setting. Given the context—an Asian American band led by Japanese American musicians who chose the name Hiroshima—the resonance of a critical politic is unavoidable.
- 74 In response, I would like to quote Akira Tana, a mainstream drummer, at length, as he notes the overarching dilemma faced by artists such as the members of Hiroshima.

What is [Asian American jazz]? What does it represent? Because when you hear the music, you pretty much see the same group . . . or the same people that are always presented and are always presented under this umbrella, under this name of “Asian-American jazz.” Is it the people or is it the music? For example, there are a couple of musicians who are Asian or Asian-American, but they haven’t really taken the initiative to become part of this scene, and I wonder why. Is it because they play a different kind of music that will not really let them become identified with the kind of music that is being presented by these kinds of groups? So it’s an interesting question.

For example, [pianist] Kei Akagi isn’t really a part of that scene. And I’m not involved so much, maybe because we’re geographically separated from the scene, but maybe it’s because the music that we play and the projects we’re involved in, isn’t really part of that scene.

[Say] you’re involved in the community, the Asian community, the Asian-American community. Do you stay within that realm and become part of it, or do you venture out of it, and try to explore different possibilities with different, other kinds of groups or other kinds of people that may not have any connection with that core group, ethnically speaking? Or culturally speaking? (quoted in Feng, “Akira Tana”)

- 75 The jazz writer Will Friedwald voices the opinions of many critics of fusion, and the equivalence given to “commercial success” and “lack of aesthetic integrity” in his remarks is clear. He states unequivocally,

I accept the basic notion that jazz itself, even in its purest form (whatever that may be) is a fusion; jazz was already a mixture of a million other musics even by the time it had left New Orleans. . . . I think the reason jazz-rock is such a big deal . . . is economic. [The fusion band] Weather Report could easily be Financial Report. Jazz musicians added electrification to their bands [in order to] expand not just their musical horizons but their economic base. (Quoted in Taylor, *The Future of Jazz*, 63)

Jazz critic Stanley Crouch, writing of Miles Davis and his fusion turn, notes contemptuously, “Desperate to maintain his position at the forefront of modern music, to sustain his financial position, to be admired for the hipness of his purported innovations, Davis turned butt to the beautiful in order to genuflect before the commercial” (“On the Corner,” 166).

Pointedly, regarding Hiroshima’s self-description as a smooth jazz group, Mark Gridley writes in *Jazz Styles*, a much-used textbook on jazz, that smooth jazz “is background music with a beat,” continuing with a discernibly critical tone, “Most styles of jazz have had their easy-listening variants, and this is fusion’s” (357).

- 76 Interview with Nic Paget-Clarke, 1997.
- 77 Although I would argue that the conflation of smooth jazz and fusion is done in error, the Hiroshima Web site uses the now-accepted radio and marketing appellation *smooth jazz*, which stands in for a broad range of musicking that encompasses adult rhythm and blues, urban contemporary, and New Age, as well as what I call fusion. These genre nominations are loosely applied terms, but in my other work I am attempting to mark a finer distinction between fusion (or jazz rock or jazz funk) and later developments such as smooth jazz. I am also extremely wary of using radio and marketing terms to distinguish musicking forms.
- 78 Quoted on the Hiroshima Web site, <http://www.hiroshimamusic.com> (accessed October 10, 2006).
- 79 Edelstein, “An Inventive Fusion of Music and Culture Has Hiroshima Building the Bridge.”
- 80 Quoted on the Hiroshima Web site.
- 81 June and Dan Kuramoto, interview with Baldwin Smith, 2003. <http://www.thejazznation.com/Spotlight/hiroshima/hiroshimaz.htm> (accessed August 10, 2003).
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 This truism is not applied strictly. Although, for example, the hip hop group Public Enemy enjoyed commercial success, its political agenda was never questioned. This difference can be arguably attributed to Public Enemy’s explicit expression of political ideals and positions on a variety of social issues.
- 84 Edelstein, “An Inventive Fusion of Music and Culture Has Hiroshima Building the Bridge.”
- 85 Quoted on the Hiroshima Web site.
- 86 Breest, “Bridging Music.”

- 87 Ibid.
- 88 At any rate, there is little antagonism between what can be seen as opposing camps, though I admit I have presented it in a way that would make such a conclusion reasonable. For example, the Hiroshima koto player June Kuramoto performed with Mark Izu and Anthony Brown for a production of *Kuan Yin: Our Lady of Compassion*, a recent performance work by Mark Izu and Brenda Wong Aoki. Again, the complex relationship between ethnic, political, and aesthetic affiliations in the Asian American jazz community complicates easy analysis.
- 89 Ho, "Beyond Asian American Jazz," 47.
- 90 Kotoist Miya Masaoka performs experimental works that incorporate jazz, art music, and the traditional koto repertoire in ways that blur generic designations. Her recordings with artists such as the African Americans Steve Coleman, George Lewis, Reggie Workman, and Andrew Cyrille testify to the linkage between Asian American and African American artists. The title and musicking on her album *Monk's Japanese Folk Song* (1997), created with the bassist Reggie Workman and the drummer Andrew Cyrille, are sly comments on this cross-cultural collaborative effort.
- 91 Quoted in Shoemaker, "East Meets Left," 84.
- 92 As Anthony Brown remarked to me in a conversation about his recording of Duke Ellington's *Far East Suite*, "Well, we got nominated [for a Grammy], so somebody's listening!"
- 93 Palumbo-Liu, *Asian / American*, 389.