Redefining Asian America:
Politics, Aesthetics, and Social Networks of Independent Rock Musicians

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

McIntire Department of Music

University of Virginia
May, 2011

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Abstract

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American rock musicians of Asian descent are finding powerful ways to express their cultural identities, despite their practical invisibility in mainstream media. This ethnographic dissertation explores the social and musical life of second and 1.5-generation Asian American musicians actively engaged in independent (indie) rock music performances. By investigating the performance, ideology, and social networks of such musicians, this study interrogates the boundaries of the "Asian American" ethnic identity and the socio-cultural imagination of "Asian America" in the post-Civil-Rights and post-9/11 United States. This dissertation argues that the musicians perform with a dynamic of ambivalence, covering, and uncovering ethnic and racial traits associated with Asian identities. This dynamic in effect contests racializations. Turning outward and eastward, the musicians stretch the confining borders of the U.S., reaching fans and fellow musicians in various sub-regions of Asia.

In these chapters, I document how the musicians leverage the Do-It-Yourself ideology, central in indie rock music scenes, to deploy self-invented ethnic notions, circumvent norms practiced by their white middle-class peers, and transform marginalizing race-related articulations. Reclaiming their outsider status, they challenge the contradictions within the discourses of liberal multiculturalism and forge bonds with others including non-Asian minority groups. This dissertation also

examines various transnational musical projects connecting Asian America to a geographical and symbolic "Asia." Through touring and media exchange via the Internet, the musicians build a set of social networks comprising a unique translocal indie rock music scene of their own. I explore this translocality by adapting web-mining and mapping technologies from the digital humanities. Finally, I discuss the formation of my band Dzian! as a reflexive, performative response to the issues related to race, ethnicity, and melancholia raised during my fieldwork.

To my dearest family

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All the audio examples included in this dissertation are posted on my blog. To listen to these audio examples, visit the page [http://beingwendyhsu.info/?p=612]. The password is "melancholia".

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been completed without the support of many people. My committee, Michelle Kisliuk, Fred Maus, Joel Rubin, and Bethany Nowviskie, provided ongoing guidance. Michelle helped me to develop my voice, as a writer, and my sense of responsibility to engage with politics of the world through scholarship. Fred asked me astute questions, always challenging me to listen to music closely and to think productively about the relationship between musical sound and larger social issues. Joel's successes as a scholar-performer inspired me to integrate performance and scholarship. Bethany affirmed my commitment to public scholarship and cultivated my penchant in creative and alternative scholarly paths.

I also benefited from the intellectual guidance of Melvin Butler who illuminated for me the connection between intellectual work and public responsibility. Tomie Hahn inspired me to approach scholarship through embodied and creative means. Clifford Edwards, my undergraduate mentor, helped me see the possibility of a profound, life-long engagement with the arts and the humanities.

Equally important are my colleagues in the Music Department at UVa. I extend my gratitude to Liz Lindau, Sarah Culpeper, Kevin Parks, Allison Robbins, Michael Bishop, Shana Goldin-Perschbacher, Aurie Hsu, Jonathan Zorn, Lee Bidgood, Loren Ludwig, and Nick Rubin. I thank my dear friends Hong Hahn Nguyen, Christine Tsang, Hia Phua, and Martin Terrazas for their meaningful conversations about work, family and life. My deepest thanks go to Carey Sargent, my life partner,

who helped me untangle many thought clusters, taught me the value of teaching, and shared with me her deep commitment to combine scholarship and social activism.

I am grateful of the staff at the University of Virginia's Scholars' Lab who provided for me a second home at the University. Special thanks to Joe Gilbert who offered technical guidance on my digital project and to Becca Peter and Nancy Kechner for their humor and care.

Finally, I would like to thank the musicians who generously offered me their stories and insights. In particular, my sustained contact and friendship with Jack Hsu, Shahjehan Khan, Basim Usmani, Omar Waqar, Lisa Liu, Carol Bui, and Joseph Kim reignited my deep passion for music. Also, I thank the members of my bands Dzian! and Pinko Communoids who provided me with a shelter from the dissertation blues.

I dedicate this manuscript to my family. My father (*Ba*) instilled in me the importance of humanism and compassion through his thoughtful care for his patients as a medical professional. My mother (*Ma*) showed her unconditional love for me and for those in need. My brother Kevin, an engineer, always offered a technical solution to the difficulties that I faced in my research and performance. Special thanks to my aunt Mei-Chen Hu and uncle Hsien-Hen Lu who taught me the value of education. My deepest gratitude goes to my grandparents whose hard work (*Ah Gung*) and creative engagement in life (*Ah Ma*) inspired me to work toward personal excellence and collective well-being.

Chapter 1: Introducing the Power of "Asian American" Ambivalence

I will always remember the day I told my mother about my professional aspiration toward an intellectual and creative path. A couple of years out of college, after engaging in various music projects with artist-collaborators and working part-time at a flower shop and a wrap sandwich café, I decided that I wanted to get serious about life. The problem was that my notion of "getting serious" didn't align with my mother's expectations. I declined admission to a medical school in Chicago. As if that wasn't enough, I enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Virginia first in East Asian Studies, and then in Critical and Comparative Studies in the Music Department. This was the beginning of my pursuit of a career as a performing scholar of music related to Asia. My decision was heart-breaking to my mother who for a long time had dreamed of having a physician daughter. The mother-daughter relationship fell into an abyss of dire tension. We stopped talking about the future. We stopped conversing about life. I submerged myself deeper into the sea of comfort offered by the arts and intellectual thought.

As it turns out, I'm not alone. Five years later, during my fieldwork, I discovered and befriended musicians who have gone through a similar process of "coming out" to their parents as artists and intellectuals. I commiserated with the members of Oblisk, a Detroit-based experimental psychedelic "shoegaze"[1] rock

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[1] Shoegaze is a subgenre of rock music that developed in the alternative and independent rock music scene in the United Kingdom in the late1980s. According to *Wikipedia*, the term "shoegaze" was used by rock music press referring to the act of "shoegazing" where the musicians in these bands stood relatively still during live performances in a detached, introspective, non-confrontational state, hence the idea that they were gazing at their shoes. For more information, read: Wikipedia contributors, "Shoegazing," *Wikipedia,*

band, when the band crashed at my Charlottesville apartment on its tour in the

summer of 2009. Over a southern style breakfast of biscuits, grits, and eggs, we

exchanged stories of being "Asian" and a double-minority: an artist minority in the

family and ethnic Asian community; an Asian minority in the artist community. On

the family side, to play music means to reject the normative path of being a

responsible working professional of upper-middle class status. Drummer Roy Elturk

recounted how he regularly downplays his involvement in his band to his father, a

prominent figure in the local Muslim community. Before his band's summer tour,

Roy's father found out, through his publicist, about the tour. Confronting Roy, his

father expressed his outrage and disappointment with Roy, whom he had thought

was "over the music thing" and now "on the right path" after his one-year dental

residency. Roy told me that he has to navigate between his own "rock star" dream

and his father's expectation for him to be a "good Muslim" husband-to-be and

working professional. Born to a Filipino mother and a Lebanese father, Roy

identifies with the term "Asian American" and attributes his conflict with his

immigrant father to his bi-cultural "Asian American" upbringing. In Roy's narrative,

he constantly blurs the distinction between "Muslim", "Asian", and "immigrant"

identities. The dynamics of these shifting categories within the American Muslim

context will be addressed in chapter four.

Guitarist and singer Asim Akhtar, of Paskistani descent, chimed in to explain

that in the (South) Asian and Muslim community, music as a profession is

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The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shoegazing&oldid=424275518 (accessed April 22, 2011). I have consciously cited *Wikipedia* for only references to contemporary culture, media, and technology. I have determined that my *Wikipedia* citations to be the most up-to-date and complete sources on the specific subject matter among all archival materials.

undervalued and not associated with respect and prestige as are medicine or

engineering. He said, "According to them, a man who's a musician cannot support

his family." Traditional family values dictate that a man should provide for his family

(wife and children). From this perspective, professional achievement therefore

equals economic stability, a desirable quality in the marriage market. Asim said that

his strong passion for music makes him seem professionally distracted and of lower

status within his family and the larger Asian community.

A few months later, over G-chat, Asim illuminated the other side of the

double-minority experience. Feeling like a constant outsider, Asim divulged his

feelings of alienation as a "brown" and "Asian" racial minority among the musicians,

artists, and "scenesters" community in Detroit. He has experienced overt racism,

having been verbally assaulted by other musicians with racial slurs. He also

addressed the ubiquity of covert racism. In a G-Chat session, he explained, "I still feel

that although you may be 'friends' with a lot of other musicians here, they fully don't

feel comfortable with me/us cos [*sic*] we are not white." He refers to the source of

tension as "the subconscious white superiority complex," even among the non-racist

white artists (Akhtar 2010).

Asim's and Roy's stories, like many others I came to hear during my

fieldwork, spoke to me profoundly. Their music resonated like the plaintive poetry

of the American blues or the somber cries in the enka songs of post-war Japan (Yano

2002). This shade of blue that has been painted over our realities is empowering

only when we vocalize and share it. Literary scholar David Eng and clinical

psychoanalyst Shinhee Han posit that "racial melancholia" occurs when a racial

minority individual experiences a perpetual loss of being and feeling fully integrated

into the society, while holding on to the democratic ideal of equality. The authors

deploy the logic of "melancholia," first defined by Freud, and apply it to understand

the racial and ethnic dynamics in the United States from the minority perspective.

According to Freud, melancholia is a perpetual state of grief and is different from the

normal response of "mourning" over the "the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of

some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty,

and ideal, and so on" (1953: 243). Eng and Han discuss the clinical and social

implications of the condition of melancholia specific to the second-generation Asian

American experience of the loss of "social comfort and familiarity, national

belonging, language, family, social connections" sometimes inherited from their

immigrant parents (2003: 349). To put it simply, the Asian American melancholiac

is unable to resolve of "get over" the conflicts, ambivalences, and other feelings of

loss associated the difficulties of immigration and assimilation (Eng and Han 2003:

345). In writing an activist academic article, Eng and Han offer a productive reading

of their clinical observations of the patterns of depression among significant and

growing number of Asian American college students (2003: 344).

  This dissertation follows from Eng and Han's important political work to

make visible a set of under-heard voices of Asian American minority individuals

who withstand societal pressures of conformity and self-erasure. This project stems

from my personal empathy to this social state of melancholia. The bulk of this

project, however, departs from Eng and Han's critical articulation of alienation,

moving to a full exploration of the complexities of how these individuals in fact come to rejoice in their self-fashioning, through the act of performing music.

My ethnographic efforts focus on locating these Asian minority voices excluded in the mainstream rock music canon. I zero in on the musical and social life of musicians performing in the genre broadly defined as independent or indie rock music. My definition of indie rock refers to the outsider positions of these Asian American, cultural and institutional. In the 2000s, local-level musicians use the term "indie" to indicate their status as either unsigned or signed onto an independent (non-major) record label. Loosely used in media discourse created by zines, blogs, and music social networking sites, the term "indie rock" is typically associated with post-punk, electro-pop, post-grunge, indie-folk sounds, images, social networks, fashion, values, and other subcultural signifiers such as "the underground" and "the un-commercial." The genre origin and meanings associated with indie rock is difficult to pin down. In chapter two, I will explore the Asian American position within this matrix of racial, ethnic, and gender meanings under the umbrella indie rock experience.

In the following paragraphs, I do not intend to advance the theorization of racial melancholia. Instead, I describe my early encounter of a musical instantiation of the Asian American melancholia that instigated my ethnographic curiosity.

Releasing the Ghost in the Machine

The indie rock band Versus formed in New York City in 1990. Throughout the course of the band's history, the ethnic membership of Versus has been

predominately Filipino-American. Highlighting the band's Filipino-American Balyut

brothers, *Wikipedia* describes Versus as a "prominent example of American indie

bands emerging in the 1990s which featured Asian American members."[2] Despite

their visibly Asian American identity (Strauss 1995), members of the band rarely

mention their Asian or Filipino heritage in their songs, except in their song "Oriental

American." In a studio recording of the song, guest vocalist Asako Fujimoto (of

Japanese descent) repeatedly speaks the line "I am Oriental-American" while

swallowing and obscuring the word "American." Her vocal delivery ends with an

electronic emulation of a stutter. Foreshadowed by a slowed-down analog tape

sample in repetition, Fujimoto's vocal performance is inserted into the sonic matrix

of a rock music instrumental jam, sandwiched between a guitar riff in the

foreground and a programmed drum beat in the background [Audio Example 1.1].[3]

Throughout the track, with added reverberation, Fujimoto's vocals carry an ethereal

quality as they drift in and out of the soundscape several times. The song ends with

a series of semantically opaque lines spoken by Fujimoto: "Did they tell you what

kind of thing just this is / Just say the word what kind of you wanted anything /

Something that's funny / Cute / Something dark / Something serious." Now placed

in the foreground of the mix, these lines are delivered with even more reverberation

than previously. Further obscured by the effect of tape delay, the first line of this

section ends with an audio overlay of two words "just" and "this is," resulting in the

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[2] The most complete biography of the band Versus is found on *Wikipedia*. More, read: Wikipedia contributors, "Versus (band)," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,* http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Versus_(band)&oldid=418761492 (accessed March 22, 2011).

[3] All the audio examples in this dissertation are hosted on my blog on the Internet. They can be accessed with the password "melancholia" by following this URL: http://beingwendyhsu.info/?p=612

stuttering of a word that sounds like "justice." Similarly, the delay effect obscures the words "you wanted" resulting in a ghostly synthesized voice stammering "nuance" [Audio Example 1.2].

I do not read the studio effect of stuttering as a simple reflection of the loss of language that immigrants experience after arriving in a new country. This approach represents my deliberate refusal, throughout the dissertation, of the pitfall of reproducing stereotypes such as the Perpetual Foreigner so often associated with individuals of Asian descent. Instead, moving from the personal to the cultural, I seek to unravel the social and psychic origins of such impediment-like speech patterns and their related anxiety. Extending from Eng and Han's work (2003), my project is oriented toward a series of productive readings of these moments of cultural stutters that are often overlooked as individual mistakes, disabilities, or social and cultural outliers.

Throughout the course of this project, I let the uncanny stuttering of "justice" and "nuance" ring in my head and infuse this writing. The ghostly presence of these words reminds me of Freud's characterization of melancholia. Paraphrasing Freud, Eng and Han note the melancholic's condition that occurs when an individual faces unresolved grief and in turn identifies with the lost object:

> The melancholic preserves the lost object or ideal by incorporating it into the ego and establishing an ambivalent identification with it—ambivalent precisely because of the unresolved and conflicted nature of this forfeiture… In identifying with the lost object, the melancholic is able to preserve it but only as a type of *a haunted, ghostly identification*. That is, the melancholic assumes the emptiness of the lost object or ideal, identifies with this emptiness, and thus participates in his or her own self-denigration and ruination of self-esteem (2003: 346; my emphasis).

Fujimoto's ethereal vocals evoke a ghostly mode of being and expression that resonates with the Asian American loss of the sense of national belonging and social comfort. In this dissertation project, I work while insisting on hearing the ghostly and distorted utterance by Asian American music-making individuals. Inspired by Versus's / Fujimoto's cyborgish delivery, I intend to piece together an answer to "what kind of thing *justice is*"; while looking for any "kind of *nuance*" in the remnants of sounds and stories that I have collected from my musician-colleagues.

Versus's song also highlights the ghostly and marginal position of Asian American subjectivity within the larger cultural terrain of rock music in the United States. This song is a hidden track on the band's album *Two Cents Plus Tax* (1998). Literally, the song surfaces only when the listener rewinds to the -4:36 point from the beginning position of track one on the CD. The placement of the track contradicts the forward-moving logic of the CD playback technology. In fact, the technique of rewinding a track backwards is only accomplishable on certain older models of CD players. Music-listening, in the 2010s, is based on consumption and distribution of MP3 files.[4] Of an even more ghostly presence, this track has nearly vanished in the current technological milieu of independent (indie) rock music. Writing about the melancholic process involved in the formation of American literature, Anne Cheng cites Toni Morrison's allegory of "ghost in the machine" to figure the excluded racialized other as having a ghostly presence in the making of the "mainstream" canon (2001: 12). The issue of canonization comes into play in

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[4] Versus's song "Oriental American" also appears on a vinyl single release similarly titled. This vinyl disc was released by Teenbeat Records in 1998. More details about this release: http://www.discogs.com/Versus-Oriental-American/release/765793, accessed on March 7, 2011.

this discussion regarding the status of representation of Asian American minority experiences and subjectivities.

New York Times writer Neil Strauss comments in a 1995 review of The Ear of the Dragon tour that featured four bands with Asian American members, including Versus. In this review, Strauss commends the bands for reclaiming their ethnic identity within the hegemonic mainstream rock music scenes. He notes, "It's a brave move for groups that want their music to be considered on its own terms within the broader context of rock instead of as outsider rock made from an Asian-American perspective" (1995: 17). Strauss's remark not only points to the risk of race-based ghettoization in labeling oneself as "Asian American." It also indirectly brings into relief a double standard within the ostensibly colorblind liberalism embedded in rock music discourses in the U.S. Within the ideological structure of colorblind liberalism, Asian American and other minority artists are made to feel included in spite of the unspoken norms within the scenes that rule out or stigmatize the experiences of individuals of Asian background. I argue that this covert, racially determined double standard manifests as an instance of "American exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism, and inclusion" (Eng and Han 2003: 347). The dynamics of racial melancholia in rock music discourses and in the popular culture arena in the United States "force a misremembering of these exclusions, an enforced psychic amnesia that can return only as a type of *repetitive national haunting*—a type of negative or absent presence" (Eng and Han 2003: 347; my emphasis). Digging through CD bins, music blogs, mp3 download sites, and online social media hubs while looking for friendly ghosts of my kind, I have worked

to unearth the marginal voices of musicians of Asian descent working on the fringes of "American" rock music. And I write to contribute to an eventual reparative release of the Asian American minority subject from the nightmares of this "repetitive national haunting."

Claiming the Power of Ambivalence

I sit down at Lift coffee shop in a newly gentrified area and artists' hangout in downtown Richmond to meet Prabir Mehta. Prabir is the lead singer and guitarist of 60s-inspired indie pop band Prabir and the Substitutes. Prabir is wearing a vintage 70s khaki color cardigan sweater. Underneath he has on a white dress shirt and a black tie to go with a pair of vintage-looking dark brown bell-bottom dress pants. He wears black-framed glasses with some white and red trims – hipster-proper stylish indeed. He wears thick sideburns that seamlessly link to his longish rockstar-like dark hair which covers mostly his face. He tells me that his mother doesn't get why he lets his hair cover his face. He sits down, crossing his legs. I see his vintage leather boots. Hanging with Prabir is like hanging out with rock stars on posters and in a VH1 rockumentary. Listening to his music, I can almost hear the dustiness of his vintage style. To start the interview, I preface by describing the intent of my dissertation project. Explaining my reasons for contacting him, I tell him that I remember him from college and know that he was a musician back then. Prabir immediately asks, "Did you know that I was Asian – back then?" (Mehta 2008). Taken aback by his question, I muster a lame answer, "Well, back then, I wasn't thinking in those terms." He lets me off the hook by moving on to telling his story of immigrating from India as a child with his family.

American indie rock musicians of Asian descent adopt and transform the independent, do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.) ideology embedded in the culture of indie rock music to play with their cultural identities. This "post-identity" attitude is partly a response to the logic of identity-based politics emerged during the American civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Part of the "post-civil-rights" generation (Mahon 2004), Prabir and other musicians of Asian descent circumvent the identity categories of "Asian" and "Asian American" while creatively maintaining their self-integrity. In doing so, they engage with the social consequences of the Asian American social movement of the late 1960s and early 70s.

In her important book *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (2004), ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong aligns her project with the issues and aims of American identity politics. To set the theoretical tone of her work, Wong employs J. L. Austin's notion of "performative" in order to articulate the potentiality of creating changes through a speech act or a cultural process such as music. Wong considers both the object of her analysis, i.e. musical performances by Asian American individuals, and her ethnographic writing as instances of the performative. Wong is especially interested in highlighting moments of resistance produced by performances as they "'speak' with considerable power and subtlety as a discourse of difference" (2004: 3). In this project, I intend to add to Wong admirable scholarly engagement with identity politics. Extending Wong's formulation of an Asian American performative ethnography, I work to shed light a number of "para-performative" musical projects that revolve around the identity label of "Asian American" in indie rock music performance. The conception of the

para-performative (Sedgwick 2003:5) refers to gestures performed by those who are strategically or unconsciously left out by the ethical imperative of identity politics as informed by the civil rights movement. Rather than searching for the straight-forward instances created by an explicit assertion of a so-called "Asian American" ethnic identity, this dissertation is committed to explore para-performative utterances—as evoked by silenced Asian minority subjects. This dissertation concentrates on the cultural production by those who speak or act *around* the performative utterances to which the dominant majority feels entitled (Sedgwick 2003: 5). This dissertation is positioned to uncover these individuals' personal conflict and ambivalence to "Asian" and "Asian American" identity categories, and to investigate the ways in which they articulate and disarticulate these identity categories.

The relationship between Asian American identity politics and musical performance could also be discussed in historical terms. Sociologist and Ethnic Studies scholar Oliver Wang has offered a succinct outline of Asian American participation in popular music in the United States (2001). He breaks up his narrative into three parts based on the events in U.S. social history. He organizes his narrative specifically around the Asian American panethnic social movement in the 1970s. The first era of the development of Asian American music spanning from the 1950s to late 1960s is termed as the "pre-ethnic era." For the second era of "panethncity" spanning from the 1970s to 1980s, Wang highlights the points of interaction between the Asian American social movement of the 1970s and musical production, focusing on the case study of an Asian American folk trio A Grain of

Sand for its protest-style songs iconic in the movement. Wang leaves his section on the third and last era of "1990s and beyond" rather open-ended and exploratory. He elicits the issues of community cleavage and population changes due to the post-1965 multilayered patterns of immigration from Asia.

This dissertation picks up, temporally, from where Oliver Wang left off in his 2001 article and theoretically, from Deborah Wong's politically significant work in outing the Asian American experiences in music scholarship (2004). It offers an ethnographic insight on rock musicians' complex and ambivalent relationships to identities, communities, and discourses related to Asia and Asian America. American musicians of Asian descent exhibit a post-civil-rights ambivalence as "unlikely, unknowing, and sometimes unwilling heirs of the legacy of the [identity politics] movement" (Wang 2001:456). Ambivalence, manifest in the form of ethos, aesthetics, and politics, is central in my discussion. I argue that this ambivalence is a reaction to the racialized abjection of "Asian" or "Oriental" representations in popular discourse in the United States (Shimakawa 2002). Through performances and social networks, these musicians grapple with notions of ethnic and racial identity in ways that de-essentialize labels such as "Asian American," "Asian," and "American." This identity play, in many ways, resonates with how queer individuals speak of and around "the unspeakable" (Eng 1997). In the following chapters, I will focus on how the musicians obscure, disguise, and play with their ethnicities; how they covertly and poignantly express social alienation; and how they manage their self-consciousness.

This mode of social ambivalence resonates with Homi Bhabha's diagnostic conception of the postcolonial ambivalent subjectivity. This condition manifests in what he calls "mimicry," the struggle of the colonized in identifying with the colonizer (2004). What also constitutes this logic of ambivalence is a dynamic distanciation from mainstream white America. Here I find performance studies scholar José Muñoz's theorization of disidentification enlightening. "Disidentification" is a mode of performance based on "the survival strategies [that] the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Muñoz 1999:4). In chapter two, I will discuss how a group of musicians engage in various transformative strategies that at once reject and reformulate objectifications of Asianness.

Guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter Carol Bui offers an insight into the dynamics of disidentification. Carol titled her 2006 album *Everyone Wore White*. For this album, Carol wrote a series of songs that, in direct and oblique ways, comment on her struggle of growing up as a minority female in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. and as a daughter of Vietnamese immigrants. A blogger from the online music *zine Warped Reality* picked up these themes and wrote:

> Ambivalence is a difficult emotion to deal with in pop music. Yet, there it is in the title of D.C.-based songwriter Carol Bui's second album, *Everyone Wore White*. To a Western eye, white is, traditionally, the color of purity, and of celebration, new beginnings (brides wear white, for instance). From an Eastern standpoint, white is the color of mourning, of loss. But, to Bui —who is of Vietnamese descent— "white" is culturally fraught, speaking as it does —sociologically, culturally, and racially— of the aspirational desire to assimilate, to "pass" into the dominant culture, and in doing so, to mourn one's own cultural identification (Feldman 2007).

In an answer to one of the interview questions posed by the *Warped Reality* blogger,

Carol amends the blogger's reading of ambivalence as a depoliticized binary

between celebration and loss. She points out that the reference to whiteness was

intended to invoke the issue of race. Poignantly, she divulges her feelings of

alienation as a racial minority youth: "I wanted to be white as a kid" (Feldman

2007). Framing her sentiment in terms of the politics of race, Carol's response

seems to undercut what the blogger assumes as a desire to pass and assimilate.

Carol's response also brings up a slightly different interpretation of "mourning."

Instead the loss of her "cultural identification," as presumed by the blogger, Carol's

response arguably asserts a different object of contemplation: the loss of the sense

of social belonging. In her response, Carol implies an ambivalence toward her

identity as a racialized other. In this instance, Carol's ambivalent identification with

the lost object of social belonging, however understated, resonates with the logic of

racial melancholia as evoked in the previous section.

Responding to the blogger's characterization of her 2006 album, in a

personal email, Carol revealed a critical interpretation of her engagement with

mainstream U.S. society, a bit more complex than how the blogger surmised it. Carol

explicated that, through music, she is able to "confront and explore all sides of the

struggle" with "American" societal norms (Bui 2007). Like many other musicians in

this study, Carol uses the terms "American" and "white" synonymously. Carol's

statement illuminates that she is self-conscious about her marginal position. Yet her

statement underscores a kind of resistance against mainstream expectations for

minorities to "pass" as normative white American subjects in social and cultural life.

Mainstream media and public discourses exert pressures on minority individuals to pick a side: assimilate or not. Even public intellectual figures can sometimes reduce the intricacy of this binary. In an article about punk-rock musicians of Muslim heritage, Alan Waters, anthropology professor at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, asserts an assimilationist attitude in his remark, "Punk rock is very American, and this is assimilation through a back door" (Contreras 2010).

This project works painstakingly to dismantle the idealized discursive binary between resistance and accommodation leftover from the civil rights movement in post-WII United States. It also works against the grain of identity-based politics defined by the late 1960s and early 1970s Asian American campus and community struggles (Nguyen 2002: 5). In my analysis, I take seriously the post-civil-rights condition of ambivalence. I follow the lead of literary scholar Viet Nguyen in reading Asian American sonic and narrative production "*for* its flexible strategies that concern struggle, survival, and possible assimilation" (2002: 5). To retain the integrity of the state of ambivalence is a process of struggle. To the minority musicians, just to struggle with white (heterosexist, masculinist, and upper-middle-class) norms and the racialized abjection of Asian America in the terrain of public and mainstream U.S. media, I argue, is itself an act of covert resistance.

"There's no 'Asian American tone'": Covering and Dis-covering in Musical Performance

At a Thai restaurant on a busy street in Arlington, Virginia, I meet sisters Susan and Emily Hsu, the lead singers and instrumentalists in the "kaleidoscopic pop noir" band Exit Clov. Over plates of half eaten Pad Thai and Pad See Ew, I describe my

dissertation project to them. With a critical curiosity (both Susan and Emily are journalists), they respond thoughtfully to not only my interview questions, but also to my findings and work-in-progress theories. At one point in the conversation, Emily says, "It's not that I have trouble with my identity. It's just that I don't really see the relationship between my music and identity the way people claim." Susan adds that there may be something subconscious that informs creative processes, but there is no one-to-one relationship between their Taiwanese/Asian background and the music they produce. They say that they have been bothered by fan emails that insist on the existence of "Asian harmony" in their music. I echo their concern regarding the discontinuity between musical sound and the ethnic background of the musician. In exchange, I share with them my story of being interpreted for using an "Asian tuning" on an electric guitar detuned by alligator clips in my experimental music trio Pinko Communoids. Emily asks if my band has gotten written up for "having an Asian singer." Then she explains that the press is keen on pigeonholing her and her sister as "hot Asian twins" (Hsu and Hsu 2009). We all laugh, commiserating on the absurdities of these race-based responses.

Throughout the course of my dissertation project, I take the exchange I had with Susan and Emily to heart. Strangely, the attempt to conceptualize a disjuncture between musical sound and the ethnic background of the musician seems unintuitive in a project ostensibly about the "Asian American experiences" of independent (indie) rock music. The deeper I dig into scholarly works, with the hope of locating the intersection of music and Asian American ethnicities, the humming of this noise, stemming from the experiences of my musician-colleagues

and myself as a performing artist, rings more loudly. This noise poses a challenge to the conceptual impulse to link music and ethnicity in scholarly and public discourses. To resolve this tension, I devise a theoretical framework that resonates with the practical experiences of the performing musicians, and fruitfully engages with existing scholarship on the relationship between race, ethnicity, and music.

The issues of ethnicity and race have been broached in the scholarship on music, especially on popular music. In "From Rice to Ice" (2001), Barry Shank offers a history of mainstream commercial music in the U.S., recounting moments at which racial and ethnic meanings are produced and cemented in music. Shank's historical narrative accounts for the musical-social dynamics primarily within the context of black-vs.-white racial tension. His work exemplifies much of the scholarly conversations on music, race, and ethnicity, particularly within the North American context, with its focus on issues surrounding the black and white racial binary. Shank's framework also aligns with the approach by many American music scholars in explaining historical and social processes that racialize and ethnicize music. A few examples of this line of scholarship include Tricia Rose's study of African American hip hop (1994) and Aaron Fox's monograph on white working-class Americans and country music (2004). Both works examine the project of ethnic and racial identity formation specific to genre-based affiliations and signification. My project is committed to doing quite the opposite: deconstructing a commonplace connection between music and a racial or ethnic category. It follows Mahon's ethnography on African American musicians' participation in and identification with rock music culture (2004), a genre conventionally associated with whiteness. This project

explores the processes of an "out of synch" genre-race relationship specific to the

Asian American experiences of performing indie rock music. Oriented toward

denaturalizing the genre-race association, this dissertation interrogates the

common perception of the connection between indie rock and white masculinity

(Bannister 2006).

How does this approach contribute to the study of "Asian American music"?

This raises another difficult question: What is "Asian American music"? To find out, I

read the works by the Asian Americanist pioneers of the music scholarship frontiers,

namely Deborah Wong and Joseph Lam. In his article entitled "Embracing 'Asian

American Music' as an Heuristic Device" (1999), Joseph Lam argues for the use of

"Asian American music" as a category of music that would address the expression of

the creativity and experience of people of Asian descent living in the United States.

Regardless of the ontological diversity of the musical expressions by this group of

people, he sees the eventual canonization of Asian American music as a means

toward legitimating the presence and expressions of the people of Asian descent in

the U.S.

Lam's conceptualization, commendably, addresses the issue of the invisibility

of Asian Americans in scholarship by arguing for an Asian American space; but it

doesn't speak to the greater racial context that affects the perception of what may be

labeled as "Asian American music."[5] The term "Asian American" itself is a race-

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[5] Lam's approach seems to overlook the risk of further essentializing musics associated with the "East" or the "Orient" in North America. Here I'm referring to the racializing discourses surrounding, for instance, the historical case of yellowface performance and the contemporary counterpart of Orientalist appropriation of Asianness in hip-hop videos. Read about yellowface, Lee, Robert G. 1999. *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, *Asian American History and Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Pres; Moon,

bound term; and historically, the term emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s when social activists worked to bring together disparate Asian ethnic groups. The pan-ethnic identity label of "Asian American" was the product of politically-motivated reclamation of the racialized over-generalization of individuals of Asian descent living in the United States (Espiritu 1992). Without the political context, the term "Asian American" can seem over-generalizing as it could elide the ethnic, social, and cultural experiences of the individuals brought together by the term. Unfortunately, since the 1970s and 1980s, in the mainstream public cultural sphere, the term has lost its political edge. No artists I know and have been in contact with identify themselves as Asian American, or their music as Asian American music.

In light of the present ambivalence toward the Asian American identity, I find that Lam's strategic labeling of music may run the risk of ethnic essentialism. Lam's approach, however, is common in scholarly writing about music by Asian American individuals. Saxophonist and activist Fred Ho inscribes an ethnic essentialism in his formulation of music of Asian Americans as two "virtually diverging streams: a primary traditional, immigrant musical culture on the one hand and, on the other, a primarily Western music played by musicians who happen to be Asian American" (2009: 211). Ho uses words such as "native peoples" to represent sources of ethnic authenticity that are only diluted by experiences of transplant and migration and dissipated by the factor of time. Ho's statement maps the overly stressed dichotomy

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Krystyn R. 2004. *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University. Read about Orientalism in hip-hop videos, Whaley, Deborah. 2006. "Black Bodies/Yellow Masks: The Orientalist Aesthetic in Hip-Hop and Black Visual Culture", *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, ed. by Raphael-Hernandez, Heike and Shannon Steen, New York: New York University.

between first and second-generation Asian America onto the so-called "traditional" vs. "Western" musical differences. This generalist approach in understanding the relationship between music and ethnicity, also seen in Susan Asai's work on Japanese American music (1995), is couched within deep seated notions of cultural authenticity, the kind that may verge on essentialism. This theoretical approach has been challenged by a series of works on the pan-ethnic experiences of second- and later generation Asian American practitioners of "traditional" Japanese taiko performance (Wong 2004; Yoon 2001) and in traditional Japanese dance also known as *nihon buyo* (Hahn 2007).

With a different approach, Deborah Wong insists on the discursive clarification of her project as "Asian Americans making music," as elicited by her book's subtitle. She describes her scholarly effort as "a deliberate attempt to shift away from categories to processes" (2004: 11). She elucidates her intent: "Asking whether there 'is' such as thing as Asian American music has never struck me as the most useful question to pursue... It diverts attention and scholarly energy into defending the idea rather than getting on with the more important work of showing what it is and how it functions" (2004: 13).

In this dissertation, I maintain my theoretical focus on the rupture between music and ethnicity. Theoretically, this project diverges from Lam's approach (1999) in linking musical observations and the "Asian American" label. Instead, this work aligns itself with Wong's (2004) focus on process over category. I organize my project with the intention to locate the sounds and stories of rock musicians of Asian descent living in the United States, while avoiding the pitfall of reinscribing notions

of race and ethnicity into scholarly discourse. I intend to interrogate the naturalized

assumption that an Asian American ethnicity or race can be heard or otherwise

identified in performance by individuals of Asian descent. In my interview with him,

Prabir echoed my concern, along with Susan and Emily's. He was quick to point out

that "there's no 'Asian American tone'" on a guitar. In the rest of this section, I will

discuss how the resistance to the continuity between race and sound, or what seems

to be "musical passing" as defined by the musicians of my study, can be a fruitful

theoretical ground for the study of race and ethnicity in music. In addition, I will

shed light on how this conception can lead to a politically liberating end.

In one of her case study chapters in *Speak it Louder* (2004), Wong engages

with a "success story" of the Mountain Brothers', a Philadelphia hip-hop group circa

1990s. The Mountain Brothers won a Coca-Cola-sponsored contest while

maintaining the ethnicity of the group members undisclosed. Wong comments on

the group's methodical veiling of its names, pictures, and other indications of its

Asian American ethnicity as an instance of "passing." She writes, "The Mountain

Brothers passed that ultimate test, but they 'passed' (in at least two ways) because

they knew the rules of hip-hop authenticity and were savvy enough to abide by

them—on their own terms" (2004: 252). In general, the word "passing," however,

implies a hard line between betraying the minoritarian cause (of collective freedom)

vs. assimilating to the majority. Maybe because of Jim Crow segregation, the act of

"passing" is associated with upward social mobility. It implies a transcendence

beyond a race-defined minority status into a majority status.

I am interested neither in assessing whether the Mountain Brothers have passed the test of hip-hop authenticity; nor in debating the extent to which the aural space created by the group is "Asian American." Instead, I think it is more fruitful to offer a meta theorization of the notion of "musical passing" – a form of aural expression that allows the sound-maker to be heard without being seen. Music allows the possibility of a colorblind or race-free reception: anyone can sound like anybody. Sound is not *naturally* bound to any race-related embodiment of phenotype, although artists make choices, deliberately or not, based on what they perceive as meaningful. Sound may be meaning-ful; as importantly, it mediates meanings.

For minority artists, the cage built by racial meanings is still looming. This cage of (mis)perceptions, built by phenotypically determined notions of race or ethnicized ideas related to cultural essentialism, can imprison minority individuals. Omar Waqar, the lead singer of D.C. hardcore band Diacritical, refers to this cage as an "epidermal shackle." He wrote a song entitled "Envy" to evoke a state of being freed from the racializing entrapment that he experiences in his daily life. "Skin so soft / I wear you like a jacket / You're my epidermal shackle…/ If my exterior was invisible / It would answer all my prayers" (2007). I contend that a race-free sonority can be an instance of liberation from the epidermal shackle. Susan, Emily, Prabir, Omar, and many other musicians whom I've met in my field research have helped me imagine this liminal state of race-free liberation. The desire to be liberated from this cage should not be read as selling out or accommodation. A race-free sonority is an existence in comfort. This liminality suggests a possibility of

agency in the face of a world with underlying racial tensions, a world where people skirt around the topic of race most of the time, and only talk about race in accusatory or threatening moments of outburst.

Rather than passing, maybe a more useful term is "covering," as suggested by Kenji Yoshino, a law professor at Yale. In the preface of his book *Covering* (2006), Yoshino introduces his conception of covering: "Everyone covers. To cover is to tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream" (2006: ix). Individuals cover their stigmatized traits in their daily life. "Covering is a hidden assault on our civil rights" (2006: xi). In comparison, the notion of passing seems insufficient in capturing the complexity of how my informing musician-colleagues relate to the world. Maybe they intend to engage in the dynamic of covering more so than passing. If that's the case, then playing music is an ongoing struggle with the covering, un-covering, and dis-covering of one's traits, construed as "different" or stigmatizing in this imperfect world.

The connection between music and ethnicity is broad and theorizing this connection can lead to circuitous and complex discourses. This dissertation, in short, resists the temptation to short-circuit this complex cluster of meanings. It re-narrates the stories that revolve around the notions of authenticity, by shaking these notions loose from the bodies of the performers. In doing so, it allows room for creative possibilities to transform notions of racial and ethnic essentialism, old and new, through the co-motion of covering, un-covering, and dis-covering ethnic and racial traits. In addition to this dynamic co-motion around domesticating racializations, the musicians also seek outward connections with the geographical

and symbolic Asia. This dissertation engages in the musicians' geographical re-routes that lead to a radical re-configuration of the sociocultural links between Asian American and Asia. This is explored later in the chapters on transnational performance and community-building.

Methodological Notes

This dissertation is an ethnography that focuses on the social practice of rock music-making at the independent level by American musicians of Asian descent. Independent musical production in the United States involves a number of musical and social transactions such as live performances, recording, touring, networking, promoting, and show booking. The methods of my ethnographic study thus consisted of observing, participating, taking field notes, analyzing, documenting, blogging,[6] and interacting within these socio-musical contexts. In addition to experiential data, I conducted formal and informal interviews, archival research, along with media analysis of both studio and show recordings, and band websites.

My ethnography explores the newly emerged meanings of "Asianness" and "Asian-Americanness" within an increasingly globalized cultural ecology. Translocality and transnationality are essential to the performance experiences and social connections of rock musicians, even at the independent level. Not only that, translocal and transnational experiences are fundamental in Asian American social life. In his influential edited volume *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of*

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[6] My personal blog at Yellowbuzz.org that documents my show experiences and thoughts about recordings makes my work available, through the Internet, to the musicians in my study. A discussion about my blog as an important site of interaction between me and my informant musicians appears in the extended subchapter that follows chapter four.

Asian America, anthropologist Martin Manalansan asserts, "The field is increasingly focused on not only the implications of 'local' occurrences to various communities in the 'area' but also on the continuous and discontinuous threads between the 'local' and the 'transnational'" (2000: 4). Building on studies of music and migration (Lipsitz 1994; Reyes 1999) in ethnomusicology, anthropology, and other relevant area-related studies, this project argues for scholarly attention to music touring and social-networking as a culturally significant practice. This music-focused case study adds to the study of expressive culture within the subfield of the anthropology of globalization in which scholars investigate transnational flows of people, capital, mass media, ideology, and technology (Appadurai 1996) using ethnographic methodology (Inda and Rosaldo 2008).

I employed a "multi-sited" framework (Marcus 1994) for my field investigation. The physical sites include the metropolitan areas of New York and Washington DC, as well as satellite locales such as Boston, Philadelphia, Richmond, and Charlottesville. My concentration on northeastern and Mid-Atlantic cities is based on the social structure of the U.S.-based indie rock scene. These cities, particularly New York, have been known for their active indie rock scenes. Building translocal links, many Asian American musicians make frequent stops in east coast cities on their tours and exchange shows with bands from other cities on the circuit.

One crucial site of my field research was the Internet. As soon as I began my fieldwork, I realized the diminishing importance of physical locales in the musicians' performing lives. I discovered a level of translocality in the musical life of my informants, more intense than what I had imagined. The musicians' prevalent usage

of digital social media allowed them to traverse the physical and geographical

boundaries of their home locales. In particular, they have used the Internet to

extend beyond the physical stage of their musical project. I have "attended" a

number of performances broadcast from New York City in real time via the Internet,

while sitting (and not dancing!) in front my laptop computer at home in Virginia.

The Internet has also augmented the feelings of intimacy and privacy revolving

around the social contact between me and the musicians. I have had countless late-

night conversations, sometimes concerning details of personal and family life, on

chat services such as G-Chat, AIM, and MSN Messenger. The Internet is no longer

just a means of communication among my musician-informants, their friends and

fans, and me. Digital social media make up an important new "site" of social

interaction and creative expression. Not only that, digital social media are the key to

social networking and community building for the musicians, especially for those

who were previously invisible and silenced. In a recent article in the *L.A. Times*,

Oliver Wang captures the centrality of digital media and technology in the recent

successes of Asian American performing artists. He notes:

> If these various histories laid down the kindling, the emergent Internet tools
> of self-expression and distribution of the last 10 years showered down
> sparks. Popularity metrics are now calculated by more than simply Billboard
> sales; they're also tracked in YouTube hits and re-Tweets. Technology alone
> won't provide Web stars self-sustaining careers, but after generations of
> invisibility in the conventional pop industry, at least Asian American youth
> now master more means to achieve visibility (2010).

In short, the field of my investigation came to include the digital social terrain that I

navigated within the scope of dissertation research. To document and articulate

these digital social interactions, I acquired a set of methods from the digital

humanities, and applied them to the study of this semi-plugged-in socio-music world. The digital aspects of my field research methods have shed light on paths unexplored in existing ethnographic studies. The specifics of these digital ethnographic processes will be examined closely in the methodological extension of chapter four.

Finally, I employed Michelle Kisliuk's "performance ethnography" (1998) to integrate critical positionality, political awareness, and the intentionality of social engagement into the processes of my field research and ethnographic writing. The musicians involved in this project were between twenty and forty year of age. Almost all are children of immigrant parents who moved to the U.S. and settled around east coast cities after the lifting of the federal immigration ban on individuals of Asian origin in 1965. Most individuals are U.S.-born, second-generation Asian Americans, while a significant portion of them are of one-point-five-generation (1.5-generation), referring to the foreign-born individuals who moved to the U.S. at an early age and have spent the majority of their life in the U.S.. These young individuals have in common a "hyphenated American" experience of having had a bi-cultural, bilingual upbringing, and perhaps transpacific travel experiences to Asia in their childhood or adult life. Particularly, my identification as an Asian/Taiwanese American musician and music scholar has been intellectually productive in positioning this research project. My experiences as an active performer in the rock and experimental improvised music scenes in the U.S. and in Taiwan have also enabled me to gain empathy and access to my musician-informants. Moreover, my 1.5-generation immigrant experiences have both

resonated with and set me apart from my informants, who could self-identify as either more "American" or more "Asian" than I. This liminal "bifocal" positioning (Maira 1998:24) has productively informed my analysis of the social experiences, processes, and meanings of ethnic identification and transnational musical connections.

Chapter Overview

        This musical ethnography interrogates the social, cultural, and geographical boundaries of "Asian America" in the post-Civil-Rights and post-9/11 United States. I argue that Asian American independent rock musicians perform with an aesthetic of ambivalence which in effect contests the domesticating effects of an "Asian American" ethnic marking. In doing so, they undermine the racial structures in the context of liberal multiculturalism, and of the recent resurgence of Islamophobic Orientalism. Turning outward and eastward, the musicians stretch the confining borders of the U.S., reaching fans and fellow musicians based in various sub-regions of Asia. The structure of the following chapters corresponds to the movement – from domesticity to transnationality – of this over-arching argument. Chapter two continues from the diagnostic reading of the domesticating and racializing experiences of being Asian minorities and investigates how these individuals use music to transform marginalizing notions related to their sense of identity. Chapters three and four are oriented outward at the liberating space of transnationality. These chapters identify and trace moments of exhilaration, empowerment, and resistance experienced by the musicians in their transnational musical and social

engagement. Finally, chapter five concludes the dissertation by a reflexive turn toward my own experiences of playing a rock music band as a performative response to my fieldwork. I should note that these analysis chapters are issue-based, not artist-based. Thus, some artists may appear in more than one chapter.

In chapter two entitled "Defying Multiculturalism: The Cultural Contradictions of the Indie Rock D.I.Y. Ideology," I document how the musicians navigate the contradictions within the discourses of liberal multiculturalism. I first outline various manifestations of the multiculturalist logic in indie rock music journalism and genre discourses. The bulk of the chapter focuses on three musician/band-based ethnographic case studies. This analysis examines the strategies the musicians deploy to de-essentialize "Asianness" and other confining and commodified notions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. The first case study features Korean-American Kathi Ko, the guitarist and bassist of the Brooklyn-based all-female punk band BoySkouts and indie punk group Each Others' Mothers. Kathi aligns herself, aesthetically and socially, with the feminist punk Riot-Grrrl movement of the 1990s. Kathi self-consciously forges a colorblind "music-over-ethnicity" identity, distancing herself from her perceived Asian "otherness." Her dynamic disidentification exposes the ideological contradiction between democratic ideals and white norms embedded in the indie punk music scene. The second case study features guitarist, singer, and songwriter Carol Bui's musical adaptation of Arabic pop and belly dance music. In her music, Carol exhibits traits of an oblique identification with Middle Eastern femininity and sexuality. I describe how Carol's articulation an unfamiliar Asian feminine otherness, one that is distant

from her own Vietnamese American background, exemplifies strategic anti-essentialism (Lipsitz 1994). The third case study highlights the delivery of an anti-status-quo ethos by the South Asian American punk band The Kominas. Through songwriting and D.I.Y. community-building, The Kominas challenges the racializing effects on individuals of South Asian and Muslim heritage after the events of September 11th. The band brings together various contestational micro-universes, while forging bonds with other minority groups across the axes of religion, race, and ethnicity. In doing so, The Kominas, I contend, transforms the liberal, domesticating manifestations of multiculturalism to create a pro-immigrant, polyculturalist (Prashad 2001) space of radical resistance.

My third chapter "Traversing Transnational Ethnic Politics with Erhu-Rock: The Case of The Hsu-nami," follows the story of Taiwanese American Jack Hsu and his North-Jersey-based band The Hsu-nami. This chapter examines their experiences of performing in various transnational situations fraught by the geopolitics among China, Taiwan, and the United States. In this chapter, I offer a close reading of transnational contact in a performance featuring The Hsu-nami and Chthonic, an extreme metal band touring from Taiwan. Following Bandana Purkayastha's work (2005), I foreground transnationality as a key context of ethnic identity reconfiguration in the later part of the first decade of 2000s. First, I analyze the key moments of The Hsu-nami's engagement with Taiwanese nationalism via its contact with Chthonic. This analysis is followed by an interpretation of the respective role of the traditional Chinese instrument *erhu* in these two bands, examining the processes of Jack's creative construction of a unique "erhu rock"

sound and genre. The next section explores Jack's personal ambivalence and struggle with the complex transnational politics among China, Taiwan, and Taiwanese America. The last section consists of an analysis of press and media controversy surrounding The Hsu-nami's airplay at the Olympics in Beijing. The chapter concludes with an ethnographic analysis of Jack's recent deployment of the metaphor of cultural diplomacy, in light of the polarizing and pigeonholing forces impinging upon his band.

The fourth chapter, entitled "The Kominas' Punk Punjab and Digital Diaspora: Reclaiming a Socio-musical Transnation," discusses how The Kominas uses music and social media to re-embed themselves into a social world ridden with neo-Orientalism and Islamophobia after the events on September 11. This chapter extends the issues of transnationality and geography that emerge in chapter three. Theoretically, I deploy Josh Kun's conception of "audiotopia" to approach music in spatial terms. In the first section, I engage in close readings of a series of songs by The kominas. In these close readings, I describe The Kominas' transnational "home" created by the band's unique musical adaptions of rhythm, lyrics, dance, and styles extracted from British punk rock and South Asian film and folk music. The next section sets out to explore the contours and dynamics in the vastly translocal community built by The Kominas, beyond the borders of the United States. I focus on The Kominas' efforts of community-building via the use of social media. I trace the band's involvement in the formation of the transnational scene self-labeled as Taqwacore, a punk-inspired music subculture affiliated with alternative notions of Islam. Quite literally, I offer a set of visualizations and narratives that depict the

band's "digital diaspora." I argue that by social-networking with other "brown"- and taqwacore-identified individuals across the borders of several nation-states, the band successfully de-centers Anglo-American hegemony in the global cultural and punk rock terrain. To present my argument, I utilized digital humanities tools such as web-mining and mapping technologies to visualize the social networks of the musicians in my study. This process of visualization has helped me to analyze the social geography of musicians who question their sense of ethnic and national belonging and to situate the ethnographic details of my 24-month field research within a global context. In an extended subchapter, I will situate my digital methods within ethnographic literature and the critical race discourses around cyberpunk literature, postcolonialism, and postnationality.

Finally in chapter five "The Scholar-Performance Emerges: Reflexive Performance as Public Scholarship," I explore the practice—in performance—of intellectual issues developed in research about Asian American participation in independent rock music. The sounds and stories that musician-colleagues shared during my 24-months of ethnographic engagement with a dozen bands (of partial or whole Asian American membership) inspired me to start my own band Dzian!. In this group we adapt and perform Asian rock music from the 1960s and 70s, to challenge the Anglo-American hegemony of rock music, a vision inspired by my interactions with The Kominas. To inscribe Asia and Asian America into rock music discourses, we perform to make this obscure body of music visible in local and regional music scenes. I consider Dzian! a post-fieldwork project of public scholarship: a playground to experiment critically with concepts of race, ethnicity,

and postcolonialism formulated in my dissertation. This epilogue presents a set of narratives that highlight performative engagement with my dynamic and ambivalent (dis)identification as a Taiwanese American. I address how musical performance alleviates my struggle with orientalism (Kondo 1997) and racial melancholia (Eng and Han 2003). I describe how performing has generated personal and collective reparation for an Asian American loss of a sense of social belonging. This musical project is committed to the cultural work of "undoing fieldwork" (Kisliuk 1997), and gestures toward the intersection between ethnography and activism (Wong 2004). Privileging the act of public music-making, I contend that the role of scholar-performer is one that can thoroughly embody scholarship as a social practice.

<u>A Coda</u>

What if I could see you
Would you say to me
All the time
You've been so cold
I've hid inside
And if words could mend your eyes
I'd scream a thousand times
I'd scream a thousand times
Why do you hate
Why do you hate me

- "Ignorance" by Diacritical; lyrics by Omar Waqar

I put Diacritical's track "Ignorance" on repeat, especially when I feel alienated and sad living as an Asian American minority in Central Virginia where Asian ethnic enclaves are virtually invisible, where I simply feel like I don't belong. Sometimes I

too want to scream with Omar and his band mates, "Why do you hate me? Stop the hate." But I'm not sure if my voice is ever heard. All I know is that Omar's fast power chords and Kurt-Cobain-like anthemic youthful screams ameliorate my state of alienation. Music is more than a mode of expression because it articulates a shade of feelings and experiences greater than the individual. Omar calls it a "musical jihad," a non-violent struggle against racial hate (Waqar 2009c). This collective state of ambivalence, rage, melancholia, and anger, after José Muñoz, should not be seen as "pathology or as a self-absorbed mood that inhibits activism. Rather it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names" (1999: 74). The dead, in this uncanny space populated by Asian American voices and sounds, are the performing ghosts that float in and around mainstream U.S. media. They lack an identifiable body that anchors and a sense of cultural citizenship. Oliver Wang sees music as "a site where Asian American communities could be imagined symbolically, in resistance to the denial of that collectivity in the American political, social, and material world" (2001: 443). Along with the Omar and all other musicians that I met and befriended during my fieldwork, I write to break loose of the epidermal shackles that bind us, and to build communities to bring together the lone sounding spirits.

Chapter 2: Defying Multiculturalism:
The Cultural Contradictions of the Indie Rock D.I.Y. Ideology

> *I was watching that horribly stereotype filled movie Indiana Jones and the temple of doom. Laughing inside to the seemingly cartoonish portrayal of South Asians in western media. When the small Asian boy shouted "Indie! Indie! Look out!" I knew then that the future would be a glorious one. Filled with loud craziness and experimental music. I was going to DIY my face off. Indie... yes... Indie, indeed.* -- Omar Waqar (2009b)

On his biography page, guitarist and songwriter Omar Waqar keenly

articulates the power and the contradictions of the indie rock do-it-yourself

ideology. In five sentences, Omar transforms the word "indie" into a satirical double-

entendre. First he refers to the film *Indiana Jones*, critiquing how mainstream U.S.

media caricatures Asians. He then assumes the subject position of "the small Asian

boy" in the movie whose exclamation rings beyond the movie to articulate his

purposeful musical endeavors. With that, Omar asserts "indie" as an action, applying

the D.I.Y. ethos rooted in the hardcore and punk subculture, as a way to reclaim the

abjected Asian minority position. Now blasting his "loud craziness and experimental

music," the small Asian boy wields the power to speak for himself while navigating

in the world.

In this chapter, I argue that the multiculturalist ideology dominates the

conceptions of race and ethnicity within the current (circa 2000s) indie rock music

discourse and scenes. I use the word "multiculturalism" to refer to the liberal

ideology that strives for racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in the post-Civil-Rights

United States. I contend that the current multiculturalist environment provides an

opportunity for individuals who fall outside of the black-and-white racial binary to

experiment with their formerly silenced sound and identity. But this multiculturalist space is not "free for all," and has consequences, especially for minority artists.

This chapter will first examine how young indie rock musicians – Kathi Ko and Carol Bui – use the D.I.Y. ideology to express and contemplate their unique "indie" identities. This analysis focuses on the strategies they deploy to de-essentialize "Asianness" while negotiating issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. The rest of my discussion will focus on the struggles of The Kominas against multiculturalist tokenism and media sensationalism revolving around South Asian and Muslim identities in the post-9/11 era. The Kominas' story illuminates a socially engaged, minoritarian perspective as a critical alternative to multiculturalism. The juxtaposition of these three case studies will hopefully expose the double standard within the liberal-leaning D.I.Y. ethos espoused by indie rockers; at the same time, shed light on the limitations and contradictions of multiculturalism practiced in the U.S.A.

Moving Beyond the Black-and-White Story

Scholars of popular music studies have noted the predominance of white male musicians in British and American indie rock music. According to them, indie rock musicians in the 1980s turned away from their contemporaneous mainstream sound and image, and defined their aesthetics in opposition to what was perceived as the commercialized 'pop', namely, soul, hip hop, disco, and other genres associated with dance, blackness, and the body (Bannister 2006; Hesmondhalgh

1999).[7] This self-conscious exclusion of musical blackness led to the construction of "a canon of white, underground rock references" (Hesmondhalgh 1999: 38).

A similar, perhaps more nuanced, chain of conversations assessing the socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial composition of the indie rock music scenes in the 2000s occurred more recently in the realm of pop culture commentary. *New Yorker* pop critic Sasha Frere-Jones (2007) wrote a polemical piece accusing indie rock of losing its soul, i.e. a connection to musical blackness. Frere-Jones claims that Indie rock stripped rock music of its black influences and ceased to participate in the tradition of musical miscegenation embedded in the history of American rock 'n' roll. He laments indie rock musicians' negligence of rhythm in songwriting and their lack of showmanship, both are qualities characterized as being central in black American music of the mid 20th century. In terms of vocality and lyrics, Frere-Jones writes, indie rock singers "abandoned full-throated vocals and began to mumble and moan, and to hide their voices under noise. Lyrics became increasingly allusive and oblique" (2007: 176).

Writing in *Slate*, Carl Wilson (2007) responds to Frere-Jones and offers an alternative, but similarly symptomatic, reading of indie rock music. The "trouble with indie rock" concerns less the issue of race than class. Wilson argues that indie rock's nostalgic quest for "antiquarian music and escapist spirituality" make the genre more akin to the 1960s folk revival. Indie rock is filled with "bookish and nerdy" (as opposed to "body-centered") aesthetics and has a tendency to "show off its chops via its range of allusions and high concepts with the kind of fluency both

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[7] Journalists and scholars have noted the line "Hang the DJ" in the Smiths' song "Panic" as an example for indie guitar rockers' anti-black sentiment (Bannister 2005, 64).

postmodern pop culture and higher education teach its listeners to admire." These characteristics reflect the elite taste and status of the individuals of "'knowledge workers' in training' and neighborhood-gentrifying type living in 'creative' college towns."[8] Wilson astutely locates this class-based taste demarcation within a global context: specifically, "the split between a harmony-and-lyrics-oriented indie field and a rhythm-and-dance-specialized rap/R&B scene as mirroring the developing global split between an internationalist, educated comprador class and a far less mobile, menial-labor market" (2007).

Wilson points out one other fallacy assumed in Frere-Jones's article: "What's more, racial lines in the United States no longer divide primarily into black and white. When 'miscegenation' does happen in music now, it's likely to be more multicultural than in Frere-Jones' formula, as in rainbow-coalition bands such as Antibalas and Ozomatli." Wilson's (2007) suggestion of looking beyond "the black and white story" within indie rock music sparks a light. Ann Powers (2007), chief pop-music critic of the *Los Angeles Times* continues from Wilson's seed of argument to name several cross-fertilization projects that complicate genre, race, and ethnicity-based distinctions within contemporary indie rock music. The names on Powers' list include M.I.A., Gogol Bordello, Devendra Banhart, Kinky, Bjork, Bloc Party, Apollo Heights, among others. Powers is keen to specify the black, white, Israeli, European (Icelandic, Roma), Brazilian, and Mexican and other Latin American influences and heritages affiliated with these artists and their creative

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[2] Wilson cites Richard Florida's bestseller *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life.* More on the socioeconomic dimension of the "creative" class, see Florida, Richard, 2002. New York: Basic Books.

output. Ethnic and musical affiliations to Asia are, unfortunately, overlooked on her list, with the exception of Bjork's inspiration drawing from Japanese musical collaborators and comic book (*manga*) visual culture. Where are the Asian ethnicities/signifiers in the mix? What can we say about M.I.A.'s Sri-Lankan descent; and Matt Tong of Bloc Party's half-Malaysian-Chinese heritage?[9]

Wilson and Powers are perhaps the first critics to notice the gradual increase in ethnic diversity in indie rock music. Yet they fail to note the emerging Asian presence in terms of band membership and sonic references. In the 1990s, Asian American musicians such as James Iha of Smashing Pumpkins, Tony Kanal of No Doubt, Matt Wong of Reel Big Fish, Mike Park of Skankin' Pickle, and Joey Santiago of the Pixies partook of the indie and alternative rock music's *side stage* in the United States. Since the beginning of this millennium, many musicians of Asian descent took the indie rock music *center stage* leading iconic groups such as the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, VHS or Beta, Asobi Seksu, Blonde Redhead, Deerhoof, Bamboo Shoots, and Thao and the Get Down Stay Down.[10]

This dialogue among today's well-known music critics provides a basis for my exploration of an Asian American positionality within U.S.-based indie rock music scenes. This chapter picks up from Carl Wilson's (2007) observation of the class-defined taste and the emergence of "miscegenation" projects by various multicultural or "rainbow-coalition" bands. Looking at indie rock music beyond the

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[3] Bloc Party is a high-profile indie rock band based in the U.K. Drummer Matt Tong's ethnicity is rarely mentioned in press. I found a brief discussion of it in this interview: "That interview with Matt Tong of Bloc Party" http://mog.com/cyberred/blog/1239853#play, Mog, Cyberred. Accessed May 14, 2010.

[4] The popularity of Japanese groups such as Mono, Boris, Boredoms, and British-Asian M.I.A. has further accentuated the representation of Asianness in the increasingly globalized indie music scene.

black and white story, this chapter asks: What is the current racial and ethnic politics, however inflected by class, gender, and sexuality, within the U.S.-based indie rock scenes? How do American musicians of Asian descent today use the indie rock sound and ideology to navigate themselves as just-above-the-radar minorities? In particular, what strategies do they employ to exploit and transform their self-identity and sensibility within in a now "multicultural" social space? What other racial and ethnic projects may they engage with in light of this presumably equal playing field? Before the analysis, I will first outline the relevant historical and institutional changes that have occurred within and around the indie rock music scenes in the United States.

The Multiplicities in Indie Rock Music Discourse

In the 1980s, the term "indie" referred to financial independence from major record companies. Indie bands and labels produced records using newly affordable technology. They formed an underground network of record distribution and performance exchange. The term "indie" changed from being descriptive to prescriptive when musicians, journalists, and label owners began to use it as a way to ascribe value to their state of independence. The D.I.Y., or do-it-yourself, ethos thus emerged as an ideological compass for some indie rockers. Indie rock musicians and music writers have since deployed the term "indie" while fluctuating between its practical, aesthetic, and ideological connotations.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, indie rock emerged from the subcultural underground to become an above-ground phenomenon central in the commercial

music industry (Zimmerman 2008). The term indie rock shifted away from being an economically distinct genre to now a more aesthetically defined category. The genre of "indie rock" split into a number of subgenres. Indie rock musicians, critics, and listeners employ subgenre identifiers to describe the sound as well as the associated image and subcultural identities. These emerging and re-emerged subgenre identifiers include: dream pop, noise rock, indie pop, indie folk, Riot Grrrl, math rock, shoegaze, lo-fi, post-rock, post-punk, post-metal, post-hardcore, slowcore, new prog, dance-punk, neo-garage,[11] gypsy-punk, to name a few. During my field research, I encountered new creative terms such as "dirty pop" or "kaleidoscopic pop noir." The list expands infinitely as subgenres further fragment and recombine with present and past genre labels. This is not to say that earlier indie rock or other musical genres are more "pure," or less hybrid. What I suggest is not just an aesthetic change, but more importantly, a discursive shift in the categorization of indie rock music in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Using hyphens and prefixes like "neo", "new", or "post", musicians (and journalists), I argue, deploy D.I.Y. inventiveness to mix-and-match tags in order to construct unique individual and band identities. Scene participants have applied the D.I.Y. ethic, emphasizing aesthetic and taste markings unique to their individual identity. Far from the early connotations of anti-establishment or economic autonomy, this new do-it-yourself ethos is embedded in a game of subcultural social identification, a ritual of social differentiation and status-making central to the indie rock music-culture.

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[5] Dan Epstein, "The eMusic Dozen: Neo-Garage", http://www.emusic.com/lists/showlist.html?lid=200633, (accessed on March 8, 2009).

Employing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Ryan Hibbet (2005) argues that the processes of category differentiation and fragmentation[12] in indie rock music discourse mirrors "high art" cultures. The practice of distinguishing various subgenre identifiers reinforces the class hierarchy within the society (2005: 56). "Indie rock exists largely as an absence, a nebulous 'other,' or as a negative value that acquires meaning from what it opposes. Indie rock is far from a static entity; rather, it is a malleable space filled by discourse and power, whose meaning is always under construction by various agents (bands, listeners, labels, critics, etc.) with diverse objectives" (2005: 58). I extend from Hibbet's discursive analysis of Indie rock music to ethnographically examine indie rock as a cultural space, grounded by a set of socially situated histories and norms. I think that Hibbett's discussion circumvents the importance of the empirical scene, demographics, and social experiences. Furthermore, he ignores the social dimension of race and ethnicity in his criticism of the collective indie rock subjectivity.

More strikingly in the 2000s than before, music associated with a temporal or a spatial (geographical) "other" has become a form of currency that indie rockers consume and invest in. I draw from sociologist Bethany Bryson's term "multicultural capital" (1996) to highlight the omnivorous taste and internationalist appetite evident in the current participants in the scene. I contend that the indie-rock imperative for multiplying and dividing genre categories reflects the logic of

[12] New York Times writer David Brooks that the indie rock genre fragmentation corresponds to the societal fragmentation of taste. Brooks asserts, "Technology drives some of the fragmentation. Computers allow musicians to produce a broader range of sounds. Top 40 radio no longer serves as the gateway for the listening public. Music industry executives can use market research to divide consumers into narrower and narrower slices." For more, "The Segmented Society," *New York Times*, November 20, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/20/opinion/20brooks.html (accessed on May 13, 2010).

multiculturalism in the contemporary U.S.. The splitting of the term "indie rock" into an array of subgenres parallels the conception of the United States as a multiracial, multi-ethnic nation-state. In this paradigm, whatever cultural difference exists under the umbrella term of "indie rock" and/or within the United States, *should be* treated with tolerance and respect. And the appreciation for broad range of subgenres and musical sounds reinforces the U.S. American liberal ideology of multiculturalism. In following sections, I examine three ethnographic case studies of musicians of Asian descent in indie rock music. Specifically, I'm interested in how these artists refuse commodified Asianness, transform Orientalist tropes in performance, and redefine tokenistic multiculturalism as a radical minoritarianism after September 11.

A Punk-Inspired Refusal of Commodified Asianness

Kathi Ko, otherwise known as "Kathi Killer", is a guitarist and bassist. She was playing in two bands when I first met her in 2007 at The Charleston, a dimly lit bar on Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg, the "hipster central" section of Brooklyn New York. Her band Each Others' Mother had just rocked its set in front of a 20-something, beer-drinking, and pizza-munching audience. Each Others' Mothers, in Kathi's words, is an "all-girl indie math-punk" band that she started with some close friends from college. Her other band, BoySkout, is a queer-identified, all-female indie pop group, also based in Brooklyn.

I told Kathi that I first stumbled upon her band BoySkout in the special music issue of *Curve*, a lesbian-focused magazine with a nationwide distribution. She

immediately asked if her full name "Kathi Ko" was disclosed in print in the magazine. I got curious about her question so I asked her to talk more about her complex self-designed identity of "Kathi Killer." She revealed that the name emerged as an intention to create a handle for an all-girls roller derby league. She drew from the name of one of her favorite bands, Sleater-Kinney, as a source for inspiration. Concerned with the awkward pronunciation of "Sleater-Killer," she dropped "Sleater" and then inserted her own first name "Kathi" in its place.

Kathi prefers "Kathi Killer" over her real name Kathi Ko. She said, "I don't really feel comfortable with my last name because it sounds Korean and Asian." Kathi's of "Asianness" is specific to her second-generation Korean American experience. And her notion of "Asianness" is strongly tied to its commodified form in the U.S. During her childhood, she told me, she always saw herself in opposition to her sister, the "good Asian kid." Her sister and friends collected all the Hello Kitty stuff that Kathi was never into.[13] I asked her what she thinks of the prevalence of Japanese pop culture in the U.S. She said, "it's everywhere now. It's all over St. Mark's Place and the East Village. If you walk down the street, you will see all these Japanese restaurants and stores that sell Asian pop music and paraphernalia" (Ko 2007).

What Kathi distances herself from is not the geographical Asia or the ethnic Asian America. I interpret Kathi's defiantly displacing or "killing" her Asian-or-Korean-sounding last name as an instance of her contestation against the commodification of "Asia" in the United States. What Kathi rejects is a specific brand

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[13] Kathi's sister is getting a Masters degree in education at Columbia University whereas Kathi went to SUNY Purchase that, according to her, is "where all the punk kids go."

of Asianness constructed out of the capitalist impetus to consume Asian culture and

people. Alluding to Sleater-Kinney, a band that emerged from the 1990s Riot Grrrl

feminist punk movement, Kathi evokes an anti-capitalist stance against consumerist

culture.

In a recent email exchange, Kathi informed me that she has returned to the

Riot Grrrl D.I.Y. roots by organizing community events in the For the Birds

Collective, a New-York-based group that aims to empower women through creative

arts and scholarship. Through the collective's zine and recording distribution, she

released *Gimme Cooties*, featuring live tracks by all-girl or girl-fronted bands in

Brooklyn and the surrounding east coast area that she compiled from shows over

nine months. In the light blue photocopied CD liner notes [Figure 2.1], Kathi

declares, as a dark-haired cartoon-drawn figure screaming and professing in a large

conversation bubble:

> GIMME COOTIES is a declaration of grrrlspace. It's proof of something that's
> happening right now…total scheming challenging creating gettingshitdone
> supportive cootie-swapping grrrl love. i want to see truckloads of girl bands
> storm in and reinvent boring boy scenes in ways we've been dreaming of.
> seeing and hearing other girl bands…I swear it's a catalyst to start yr own.
> don't get yr cootie shots. listen to this comp. now go start a band with yr
> girlfriends (2009).

Commonly used among children, the term "cooties" refers to an imaginary bug that

exists in the bodies of the members of the opposite sex and can be transmitted

through contact. In most instances, boys accuse of girls of 'having cooties' as a way

to retain male homosocial bonds and vice versa. In the liner notes, Kathi reclaims

the term "cooties" from its unpleasant connotations associated with the female

body. In this "grrrlspace," spreading and receiving cooties is positive and

empowering. Cooties become a contagious bug that inspires girls to start playing music with their female friends and to reclaim their own space within "boring boy scenes."

hey everybody!

this is GIMME COOTIES, a comp featuring live tracks of   all girl/girl fronted bands in brooklyn and the surrounding east coast area.

these tracks were recorded throughout 2008-9 in basements and all ages/diy spaces and compiled to document a new wave of badass girls playing music.

GIMME COOTIES is a declaration of grrrlspace.

It's proof of something that's happening right now…

total scheming challenging creating gettingshitdone supportive cootie-swapping grrrl love.

i want to see truckloads of girl bands storm in and   reinvent boring boy scenes in ways we've been dreaming of.

seeing and hearing other girl bands…I swear it's a catalyst to start yr own.

don't get yr cootie shots.

listen to this comp.

now go start a band with yr girlfriends.   xo kathi

THANKS TO:

lauren measure, KW + rachel rub-a-dub-dub for helping with artwork, kathy cashel for teaching me how   to normalize track levels, FOR THE BIRDS COLLECTIVE + all the unapologetic, gang-forming, world-changing, risk-taking fuck ups i know for giving me a reason to stay here.

Figure 2.1: Liner Notes, *Gimme Cooties*, CD-R.

Even more interestingly, Kathi inverts the relation of the cootie "infection" from a hetero- to a homo-social contact. The female-to-female contact advocated in Kathi's version of grrrl cootie transmission can be linked to her perspective on commodified Asianness as I just discussed. Kathi criticizes the fetishization of Asian culture and sees it as a form of domination. Using a language of gender, Kathi expresses distaste for the capitalist impulse to *prostitute* Asian culture. This ideology resonates with what bell hooks refers to as "eating the other," a cultural process that commodifies and consumes ethnic otherness (1999). I find Kathi's comparison between the commercialization of Asian culture and selling sex insightful. Moreover, I consider her proposed solution of a female-to-female cootie

transmission subversive and refreshing. Kathi's Riot-Grrrl-inspired community building, I argue, is a form of feminist reparation of the capitalist predation of Asian culture, however fetishized, feminized, and ethnicized as an "other" in the multiculturalist environment in the United States. In Kathi's Grrrlspace, the transmission of cooties can heal her personal wounds of embodying Asianness in a world where non-white ethnic cultures are often susceptible to undesirable sexualization and commodification.

Nevertheless, born to working-class immigrant parents in Queens, Kathi admits that she feels like an outsider in the hipster indie scene in Brooklyn, despite her active involvement within it. Kathi's refusal of her ethnic heritage, I argue, can be understood in terms of racial melancholia (Eng and Han 2003). In this instance, the lost object is a sense of social comfort and belonging: a feeling entitled to most of her peers, but lost in the experience of a minority artist immersed in a predominately white music scene. Kathi's ambivalence toward Asianness also exposes the internationalist appetite for cultural otherness common among her (white) college-educated upper-middle class peers (Wilson 2007). It undercuts the seemingly progressive multiculturalist ideology in the indie rock discourse and scene in the U.S.

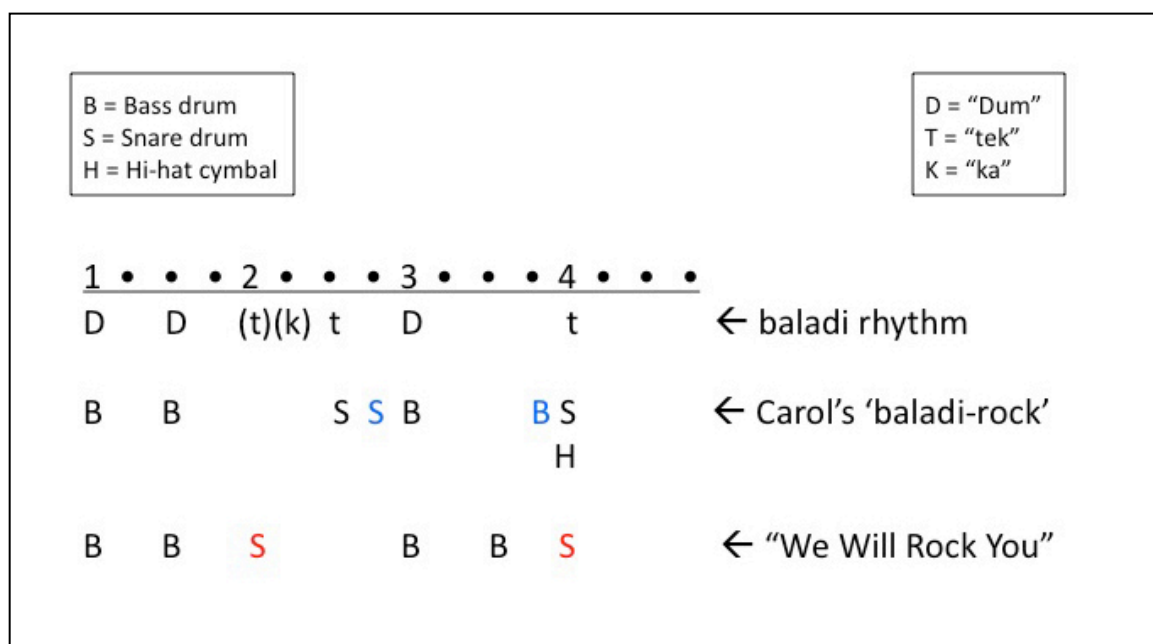Strategic Anti-Essentialist Appropriation of Orientalism

Carol Bui is a Washington, D.C.-based guitarist and singer-songwriter. In Adams Morgan in D.C, we sat down in a Middle Eastern kabob restaurant where Carol told me about her new musical direction. In our conversation, Carol discussed

at length her current musical "obsession" as Natacha Atlas, a Belgian singer of Moroccan, Palestinian, Egyptian, and British heritage. Through the filter of Atlas's multiethnic biography and influences, Carol has been intensively studying Arabic popular music. Carol's fascination with Arabic music and culture is not exoticist, I argue. In the following paragraphs, I will unfold the complexity of Carol's identification with the Middle East within the larger context of the commoditication of the Asian female body and consumerist multiculturalism.

Her new song "Mira You're Free With me" is a product of her recent immersion in Arabic music and Middle Eastern belly dance. Regarding this song, Carol said, "it's all about the rhythm." In order to embrace the centrality of percussion, Carol has been practicing on the drum set fervently so that she could play all the drum parts herself. During our conversation, she drummed on the table while demonstrating a conventional Arabic rhythm called "baladi." She described the baladi rhythm as being "heavy" and "earthy." In belly dance, this "earthiness" is visually evident in its indexical relationship to a hip-dipping or "sitting-on" movement. The traditional baladi rhythm can be notated as in Figure 1. The rhythm reads like this: Dum Dum – tek Dum – tek –. "Dum" signifies a strong beat, whereas "tek" is a weak beat. In quadruple meter, the pattern reads like this: ONE—AND—(2)—and—Three—four. (The parenthetical beats are not articulated and the capitalization differentiates the strong beats from the weak beats.) Sometimes the baladi rhythm is adorned with the optional "tek" and "ka" shown in parentheses in Figure 1 –making the vocables, Dum Dum – tekkatek Dum – tek – [Audio Example 2.1].

In Arabic traditional and popular music, this rhythm is played on a dumbek or a darabuka. On a drum set, Carol plays a rhythm similar to the baladi pattern [second line in Figure 2.2]. She adds an extra 16th note right before "dum" on beat three [notated in a lighter color in Figure 2.2]. She also attaches a 16th-note pickup before the last "tek" on beat four [also notated in a lighter color in Figure 2.2]. So, Carol's version reads like this: Dum Dum – tekka Dum – tekka –, or boom boom – chacha boom – boomcha –, or ONE—And—(2)—and—a—Three—(and)—a—four [Audio Example 2.2].

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                                           │
│   ┌────────────────────┐                        ┌───────────────┐         │
│   │ B = Bass drum      │                        │ D = "Dum"     │         │
│   │ S = Snare drum     │                        │ T = "tek"     │         │
│   │ H = Hi-hat cymbal  │                        │ K = "ka"      │         │
│   └────────────────────┘                        └───────────────┘         │
│                                                                           │
│   1  •  •  • 2  •  •  • 3  •  •  • 4  •  •  •                              │
│   D     D   (t)(k) t    D           t            ← baladi rhythm           │
│                                                                           │
│   B     B          S S B        B S              ← Carol's 'baladi-rock'   │
│                                 H                                         │
│                                                                           │
│   B     B   S          B     B   S               ← "We Will Rock You"      │
│                                                                           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 2.2: Rhythm in Carol Bui's song "Mire You're Free With Me"

Why does Carol play a rhythm that is slightly different from the Arabic traditional rhythm baladi? It is unlikely that Carol simply remembers the baladi rhythm incorrectly or cannot reproduce it. Around the same time Carol wrote

"Maira," she wrote another song entitled "Baladi" that uses a textbook-definition of the baladi rhythm. I argue that Carol's "baladi-rock" rhythm lends itself to an ethnic ambiguity by borrowing elements from both Arabic music and Anglo-American rock music. In *Rock: The Primary Text*, Allan Moore defines "the standard rock beat" (1993). Using four hits by The Beatles to illustrate the prevalence of this rhythm, Moore identifies the standard rock drum beat as a pattern consisting of beats two and four on snare drum (also known as "the off- or back-beat"), a steady 8th notes on a cymbal, and "on beats one and three, and sometimes in between" on bass drum (1993: 36). Unfortunately Moore doesn't elaborate the patterns of the bass drum between beats one and three. In *The Foundations of Rock,* Walter Everett (2008) highlights the stressed feel on beats one and three in the rock quadruple meter. In addition, Everett identifies a common articulation of a rock band's foundational rhythm as "typically laid by strong beats on bass drum and weak beats on hi-hat. This is often ornamented, as when the bass drum adds anticipatory kicks, in a ONE—(2)—and—Three—(4)—and—pattern, in conjunction with the weak-beat hi-hat (pedal closed on two and four)" (2008: 14). According to these two scholarly sources, what marks Carol's rhythm as distinct in the context of "typical" rock rhythm is the 8th-note duplet on the bass drum on the first downbeat: beat one plus the "and" of beat one. These two beats, I surmise, represent the product of Carol's translation from the Arabic baladi rhythm into a rock music context. In addition, the rhythm section in the song contains dumbek and handclapping, sounding a steady 8th-note and quarter-note pattern, respectively. These tracks thicken the percussion

texture and their unique timbres signify Carol's source of inspiration from Middle Eastern belly dance music.

Carol's ethnically "in-between" drum pattern, I think, is foundational to illustrating the emotional depth of the character Mira in the song's lyrics. Mira is a club dancer. With "crinkled dollars" and "crinkled hundreds," her clients pay for her anonymous intimacy and companionship. A superficial reading of some of the lyrics may describe what Mira does and says on her job. For example, "I'm sweet on you / Sweet on you, habibi." The word "habibi" means "my beloved" in Arabic. It is used to address a lover, friend, and other objects of endearment.

A deeper reading of the song, however, could unveil Mira's psychological interior, an emotional space filled by her angst and ambivalence. Carol's vocal performance, I contend, allows the listener to access Mira's private feelings. With a coarse, throaty, tone-defying, and PJ-Harvey-like vocal timbre, Carol sings lines such as: "I don't give a fuck / but you don't have to hear me say that" [complete lyrics are shown in Figure 2.3]. Carol's aggressive vocals provide an external commentary that critiques Mira's story as a dancer throughout the song [Audio Example 2.3]. During the chorus sections of the song, Carol chants the line repeatedly, "We're right on time," and then following with another repetition of "We're free with me." In the last chorus, Carol's vocal track is dubbed with other vocal tracks (of her own) chanting the chorus lines in repetition, thus creating an illusion of a female choir. The songs' intensity builds up, progressing alongside the increasingly pronounced percussive lines of handclaps and dumbek. The musical intensity culminates at a jubilant group vocal trance during the last line, "We're right on time." This happens in synchrony

with the overdubbing of a celebratory chant of "Ohhhh-oooh." This heightened and

dynamic vocal moment resembles a call and response among a female choir. The

female vocal overdubbing, repetitive chanting, and the simulated call-and-response

female choir suggest that the identity of the vocal subject in the end of the song is of

a group of women. Rejoicing in each other's company while singing the line "you're

free with me," this women's choir articulates a dynamic exchange of a shared

experience. The singing women perform a collective female-only solidarity [Audio

Example 2.4].

I don't feel so good but
You don't have to care
Make yourself at home with me
My legs and shoulders bare

I'm sweet on you
Sweet on you, habibi (2x)

If you're so inclined
Sweep me off my feet
Leave your crinkled dollars
Out for me to keep
Tell me about your wife
Tell me about your babies
Don't forget to tell me
How tired you've been lately

We're right on time (3x)
You're free with me (3x)

I don't know your neighbors
I don't know your friends
I don't know a soul to whom I'd tell all your secrets
Tell me all your numbers
All about your case
I don't give a fuck
But you don't have to hear me say that

If you're so inclined to sweep me off my feet
Leave your crinkled hundreds
Out for me to keep
Tell me about your wife
Tell me about your babies
I don't give a fuck
But you don't have to hear me say it

We're right on time (2x)
You're free with me (2x)

Sweet on you, habibi
Habibi inta, habibi (you're my baby)
Yalla habibi (let's go, my love)
Sweet on you

We're right on time (2x)
You're free with me (2x)

We're right on time
Ohhhh-oooh

Figure 2.3 Lyrics of "Mira You're Free with Me" by Carol Bui

Projecting a loud, compressed, and aggressive sound, Carol Bui's performance enlivens and empowers the character of Mira. Why does Carol, who is of Vietnamese descent, link an Arabic-inspired rhythm with the fictional character of Mira, who is an English-and-Arabic-speaking female club dancer? I argue that this is an instance of strategic anti-essentialism, a term that George Lipsitz has coined to refer the process that an individual "seeks a particular disguise on the basis of its ability to highlight, underscore, and augment an aspect of one's identity that one can not express directly" (1994: 62). By creating a representation of an Arabic-speaking female dancer in her music, Carol reclaims an Asian female body while circumventing the risk of being objectified.

On the surface, Carol's cross-ethnic identification with Arabic music would seem problematic as it flashes an Orientalist fantasy (Said 1979). But Carol is careful to identify her interpretation of Arabic music as being subjective. To explain her attraction to Natacha Atlas' music, she said, "it's poppy and accessible enough to me, but it's also [pause] exotic in that the melodies and the modal scales...are still a little [pause] just exotic – to me" (Bui 2009). Self-conscious of her musical "obsession" and the objectifying implications of such an obsession, she repeats the phrase "to me" twice in the sentence. Also, I want to point out that Carol, of Vietnamese descent, could run the risk of embodying the object of the Orientalist discourse, unwittingly or not. On a D.C.-based news blog, Carol's show was promoted as a "Hot Asian Alert!"[14] The Asianness of her body is highlighted over her music, on a

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[14] Gharib, Malaka, "Your Week in Music: Hot Sisters, Hot Asians, New York Jews," Wonkett, February 19, 2009, accessed on March 16, 2009, [http://wonkette.com/406397/hot-sisters-hot-asians-new-york-jews/].

billboard of ethnic and gender differences – in a tagline that says "Hot Twins, Hot

Asians, New York Jews." This multicultural-inflected tagline not only objectifies

women, Asians, and Jews, it also instantiates the capitalist appetite to consume

cultural otherness. The term "Hot Asians" specifically resonates with the trafficking

of the Asian female body in the sex-based transpacific industry of pornography and

mail-order brides.[15]

Carol's characterization of Mira is *not not* an Orientalist trope. Reinventing

her own baladi-rock rhythm, Carol Bui exploits an imaginary character constructed

out of her strategic anti-essentialist identification with a closely related "Asian"

female otherness. Performing it with a biting post-punk sensibility, Carol takes

charge of her own body. In doing so, she makes an indirect critique on the global

sexual economy that objectifies and circulates Asian female sexuality.

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[15] Incidentally, I encountered this connection one time when I stumbled upon a advertisement banner for "hot Asian girls" on the Carol Bui's profile page on social networking site Myspace.

Figure 2.4: Carol Bui in performance with her band at the Black Cat, Washington, D.C., January 14, 2011. Photograph by author.

In the downstairs performance space at The Black Cat in D.C., Carol wields a charismatic command over her band. They perform a set including a number of Carol's newly written bellydance-and-Arabic-music-inspired songs. During "Mira," the dumbek player accents the drummer's baladi-like pattern: with strong 8th-note duplet strikes on the downbeat, followed by a stressed high-pitched punch on the fourth beat. Carol leads her band by asserting her vocal authority. With a tambourine, she accents the baladi-derived rhythm. Between the sung parts of the songs, she moves her body in a stylized manner, borrowing from her training as a belly dance. Sharing centerstage with Carol is a similarly dressed woman performer who sings back-up vocals and handclaps. With their co-presence in limelight, Carol and her colleague-performer projected an unequivocally powerful women-centered poise [Figure 2.4]. Swaying in

synchronized motion, the two women chant in unison: "It's right on time / You're free

with me." I join them from the audience singing and clapping along with Carol's

tambourine. These lines ring on in my head the rest of the night.

A Dissenting Multiculturalism After 9/11

The stories of Kathi and Carol highlight the experiences of participating in

indie rock music scenes as Asian American female performers. These narratives are,

to an extent, unique to their East and Southeast Asian heritage, respectively. In this

last section of the chapter, I will continue my discussion on U.S. multiculturalism to

explore the South Asian American perspective on American rock music, specifically

within the first decade after the events of September 11th 2001. I will examine the

social and musical experiences of the South Asian American punk band The

Kominas. Focusing on how the band members engage with ethnic and racial

essentialisms, I will investigate the complex interlocking dynamics of Muslimness,

South Asian-ness, or brown-ness in the music scenes crowded by liberal

multiculturalists, hipsters, and indie-rockers.

On the main drag in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, groups of twenty-somethings

parade under the intense August sun. Sporting a hipster style en masse, they are all

wearing dark-framed "nerdy" glasses, old t-shirts, skinny jeans, slip-on canvas shoes,

and other accessories salvaged from thrift stores or purchased at a local Urban

Outfitters chain store.[16] Uniform multicolored checkered scarves wrap around their

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[16] Anthrolopogist Ted Swedenburg recounts the controversy of the Urban Outfitters' marketing of the keffiyeh as "anti-war woven scarf" in the store's catalog. More on the western appropriation of the

necks and shoulders. Without a checkered scarf, I stick out like a sore thumb. Or maybe

it has less to do to with the scarf, but more with the wearer of the scarf. Or even more

so, it has something to do with the ethnicity of the wearer of the scarf. My self-

consciousness begins spiraling into a sea of self-doubt. What does it mean to wear this

scarf anyway? What does it mean for me to wear this kind of scarf?

Known as "kufiya (conventional spelling "keffiyeh"), this piece of "ethnic"

fabric represents a vague notion of resistance, but only as a sartorial device that

displays a fashionable statement within hipsterdom. Formerly worn by rural Arab

peasant class, the keffiyeh became a symbol of nationalist resistance during the

1930s Arab revolt in Palestine and later became absorbed into European-American

leftist couture, as well as street and commercial fashion in the United States since

the 1980s. In the mid to late 2000s, the majority of the keffiyeh-clad individuals are

typically either unaware or only vaguely familiar with its pro-Palestinian, anti-war

associations (Swedenburg 2010). Collectively worn by hipsters, these keffiyehs say

one thing: the new hip couture is a piece of the ethnically other "Islamic" world.

In *Adbuster*, a magazine contributed by anti-commercialism and

environmentalist writers, artists, and designers, Douglas Haddow comments on the

commodification of keffiyeh. He claims that the keffiyeh has "become a completely

meaningless hipster cliché fashion accessory" (2008). What intrigues me is the title

of the article: "Hipster: the Dead End of Western Civilization." What do these young

keffiyeh-clad partygoers have to do with the rather serious-sounding notion of

"Western Civilization"? Perhaps Haddow is playing on the controversial

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keffiyeh, see Swedenburg, http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/ht/display/ContentDetails/i/10733/pid/897, accessed on August 25, 2010.

"civilizational" discourse, specifically Samuel Huntington's well-known, polemical theory of the "clash of civilizations" and its discursive offspring (Palumbo-Liu 2002). In the wake of the events on September 11, 2001, George W. Bush deployed the language of civilization in his declaration of the War against Terror: "This is civilization's fight," presumably against the "uncivilized" non-West. This rhetoric reinforces a spatial and political binary between us and them, here and there, "America" and the Terrorist-spawned "Islamic" world. Haddow, however, has no interest in Bush's right-wing project for constructing an imperial West. Instead he critiques this alternative, leftist stream of "Western counterculture." He denigrates hipsters for their perpetual consumption habits and apolitical ethos by comparing them with previous Western countercultural movements. Haddow's critique of hipsterdom is class-based. He keenly targets the fashion and culture industry for its ravenous appetite to commodify hipster desirables, and an uncritical complicity on the part of the hipsters themselves. Unfortunately, Haddow's assessment overlooks the racial and ethnic dimensions of this cultural phenomenon.

I sense an uneasy dissonance in Haddow's juxtaposition of an "Islamic" symbol and the failure of "Western civilization." Are all hipsters necessarily "Westerners"? What is it like to be a minority within this scene that readily consumes Palestinian or more generally, Islamic imagery as a "cultural" wearable?

I found the most fruitful answers to these questions in my interactions with The Kominas, a South Asian American punk band that spawned in suburban Boston. Browsing the band's photo gallery on Facebook, I discovered a striking photo [Figure 2.5] that offers a critical insight on the "keffiyeh" problem. In this photo,

three "brown" men of South Asian descent, each accessorized by an ethnically

"Islamic" garment, pose in a row. They stand in front of a dilapidated storefront that

appears to be an anarchist space on a city street. On the left, drummer Imran Malik

unfolds the layers of his dark blue and gray keffiyeh, perhaps in preparation to put

on the scarf. His smile radiates with a pleasant anticipation. In the middle, guitarist

Arjun Ray wears a burgundy and white keffiyeh around his neck, while holding a

cigarette in his right hand. Arjun's dark wavy hair falls over his shoulders and

blends into the ethnic textile pattern of his keffiyeh. He stands tall with confidence,

looking like a ("ethnic") revolutionary.

To his right is guitarist Shahjehan Khan, with a tightly trimmed goatee and a

receding hairline, wearing a crimson color short-sleeved *kurta* (traditional male

tunic in South Asia) with detailed gold-threaded embroidery. Relative to his mates,

Shahjehan's appearance projects discomfort. His attire is rendered *too* ethnic. He

stands nervously without shoes. His right shoulder falls a few inches lower than his

left shoulder. I read Shahjehan's poised otherness expressive of the unassimilated,

of the immigrant. Moreover, Shahjehan's performed discomfort instantiates José

Muñoz's conception of "disidentification," first introduced in the introductory

chapter. According to Muñoz:

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The
> process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message
> of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's
> universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to
> account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications
> (1999: 31).

Shahjehan's sartorial performance recycles and recontextualizes the un-hip-ness of

an unassimilated immigrant. Staged for a satirical effect, this photo as a whole

displays tension and discomfort with respect to how the keffiyeh is worn and who is

wearing it. Juxtaposing the keffiyeh and the kurta as a way to satirize a hipster

sartorial orthodoxy, the three actors expose the constructed hipness associated with

the scarf. They flaunt the potential unhip-ness of these ethnic garments. Moreover,

this picture reveals the contradictions of this seemingly progressive liberalism

embedded in the promise of this ethnic chic. The exhibited unease reveals a covert

exclusionary message that suggests: Keffiyeh against brown skin does not quite

yield the same effects as keffiyeh on white (or yellow) skin.

Figure 2.5: The Kominas. Photograph by Kim Badawi, courtesy of artist

The Kominas is well-known for its association with the grassroots music

culture self-labeled as "taqwacore." The prefix "taqwa" is a Qur'anic Arabic term

meaning "fear-inspired love" or "love-based fear" for the divine. The suffix "core" refers to the punk roots highlighting the do-it-yourself ideology and subversive attitudes central in hardcore punk music scenes. Michael Muhammad Knight coined the term "taqwacore" in his novel about a group of college-aged individuals who live in a house together in Buffalo, New York. The term taqwacore is conceived to reclaim a space for an alternative practice of Islam inflected with the punk anti-status-quo ethos. The Kominas' story is the beginning of a resounding dissent responding to the silencing of minority voices after 9/11.

Playing in the Midst of Post-9/11 Green Menace

With fans and musician friends, The Kominas are touring the U.S. this summer. To save travel expenses on their cross-country, 15-city tour, they drive a hybrid Honda Accord while towing a trailer. In the parking lot at The Bridge PAI, a local arts space where I'm hosting The Kominas' performance in Charlottesville, I stand mesmerized by their silver boxy 5 ' x 8' trailer, decorated with myriad stencils, stickers, drawings, and scribbles, contributed by the band and its cohort. These messages of inside jokes and symbols of idealism readily express aspects of their D.I.Y. Bohemian lifestyle, in solidarity over shared passion and alienation. Admiring the art on the trailer, I see an inter-faith equation of expressed as the following:

> *ALLAH = Love*
> *Jesus = Love*
> *YHWH = Love*
> *------------------*
> *Love*

One black stencil mark, with a figure of a man pulling his facial skin, reads, "MY

EPIDERMAL SHACKLE" [Figure 2.6], a lyric from a song written by Omar Waqar, also

on tour as Sarmust. Omar has been friends with the members of The Kominas since the

Taqwatour in 2007. Standing next to the trailer, Shahj (Shahjehan) recounts to me

some of their tour adventures. I am particularly struck by the story of their racist

encounter at a gas station on their way from Atlanta to Virginia. A few white

American men asked the band if their trailer was where they "keep all of (their) 'hate

mail.'" Shahj tells me that he responded by saying that they're a band. The group of

men replied, "oh, that's cool..." Apparently, their animosity diminished after they found

out that The Kominas was a group of musicians. How bizarre. Shahj tells me that he

feels as if this interaction was race-related. But he expresses that he doesn't really

understand the usage of the term "hate-mail." I think to myself, how twisted is this:

could this be an instance of the "epidermal shackle"? Punk anarchy is only "cool" and

non-threatening, as long as it's not related to people who appear to look Muslim,

Asian, or like a terrorist...
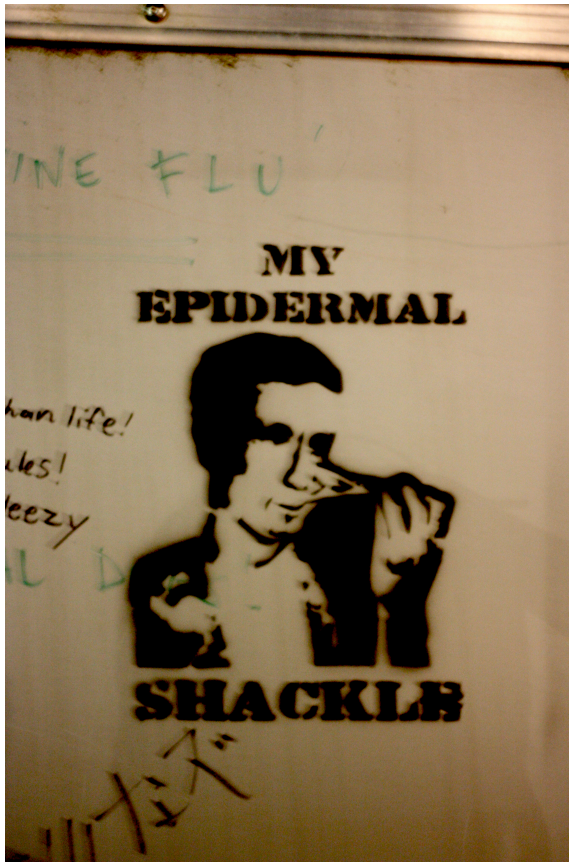
Figure 2.6: Trailer, 2009 Taqwa-Tour, The Kominas, Sarmust, Prop Anon. Photograph by author

Six weeks after September 11th, the United States government implemented The U.S.A. Patriot Act with the intention to eliminate terrorism and "unite and strengthen America" (U.S. Senate 2001). This act has mobilized laws to enforce the surveillance of terror-related activities. To enact The Patriot Act, law enforcement, military, and intelligence service officers deployed intense surveillance upon non-citizens, immigrants, and individuals of any Muslim, South Asian, and Arab affiliations. A broad range of anti-Muslim exclusions such as racial profiling and hate crimes occurred. Mass detentions and deportations of Muslim and Arab American men and a "'Special Registration' program requiring Muslim immigrant men to

register with the government and submit to questioning" (Maira 2009: 12) took place beneath mainstream media visibility. Historian Vijay Prashad links the post-9/11 condition to McCarthyism during the Cold War. Not a Red Scare, but a "Green Menace." This time, the enemy is Islam. Prashad observes, "All Muslims are suspects by association, but those who had come into even fleeting contact with the organs of Islamic radicalism are fair game for arrest and interrogation... Like McCarthyism, the main agent for social oppression is not the state, but it is private institutions and our neighbors"(2003: 72).

Basim Usmani, the bassist of The Kominas, is not a stranger to this feeling. He enacts this post-9/11 state of paranoia in his song "Sharia Law of the U.S.A." In the studio recording of the song, a looming sense of a war-bound dystopia is created by audio samples from the civil defense films formerly used as public education during the Cold War era in the 1950s.[17] The first sample occurs at the end of the instrumental introduction, following a sustained guitar feedback siren and a bomb-like accent done collectively by all the instruments in the band. The dropping of the musical bomb coincides with the sound of a large explosive in the civil film audio clip. Then the announcer admonishes, "Emergency: The United States is under nuclear attack. Take cover immediately in your area's fallout shelters" [Audio Example 2.5]. Then short snippets of another 1951 civil defense audio clip come into the mix. These are sampled from "Duck and Cover," a cartoon used to instruct children to "duck and cover" in the event of an atom bomb attack. The didactic-sounding announcer explains: "Now you and I don't have shells like Bert the Turtle,

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[17] This film is produced "co-operation with the Federal Civil Defense Administration and in consultation with the safety commission of the National Education Association", 1951. accessed on August 27, 2010.

so we have to cover up our own way…Paul and Patty know this. No matter where they go or what they do, they always try to remember what to do if the atom bomb explodes right then…" Near the end of the section, the instrumental sounds recede, then the 1950s announcer's voice resounds in the foreground of the mix, "It's a bomb! Duck and cover!" [Audio Example 2.6].

Over the punchy quarter-note attacks on the guitar, Basim's sings, "Cops chased me outta my mother's womb, / my crib was in state pen before age two – and / the feds had bugged my red toy phone." To liberate from the neo-McCarthyist surveillance, Basim proclaims the lyric, "So I devised a plan for heads to roll." What might this plan be? The speaker of the song answers with the repeated chorus line "Sharia Law in the U.S.A." Sharia is the sacred law of Islam. Basim's voice swells, sustains, and then trembles with a subtle vibrato. He sings anthemically, "Sharia Law – in THE"; then the rest of the band joins in to shout, "U-S-Aay", in the raw style of 70s punk reminiscent of the Ramones [Audio Example 2.7]. In live shows, Basim and Shahjehan pump their fists in the air while they shout "U-S-Aay." The punk "Islamist" threat in the song, I contend, is a response to the institutional surveillance and Islamophobia. In The Kominas's song, the "patriotic" exclusion of Muslims is not an *effect* of the "Islamist" Terror; the exclusion of Muslims is the *cause* of the so-called "Islamist" threat. Precisely, the song reverses the cause-and-effect logic in the conservative anti-Islam ideology as transmitted by mainstream media. According to this logic, the U.S. Homeland Security doesn't prevent Green Menace, it creates it.

Using a title similar to the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K.",[18] Basim evokes

the now-classic English punk band's anti-status-quo punk ethos. He begins the song

with similar lyrics: "I'm an Islamist; I'm the anti-christ,"[19] but with less seriousness.

Sprightly finger-snapping accompanies the syncopated vocal lines sung with a

smooth vibrato. The suave delivery of these lyrics, in the style of doo-wop or

Broadway show tunes, elicits an irony between the lines of menacing words [Audio

Example 2.8]. This is not a serious message of hate or threat. But the message is

certainly delivered with a load of pleasure. The Kominas is not a group of terrorists,

musically or socially, or in any conceivable way. The stylistic shuffling between punk

raucousness and vintage American show tunes urbanity creates an ironic distance

that thwarts the absolutist ethnic and religious ideologies embedded in the

enforcement and public rhetoric in the United States.[20] Masters of punk satires, The

Kominas parodies the stereotypical depictions of Muslim, South Asian, and Arab

masculinity rampant produced by the post-9/11 media. This dynamic of recycling

and recircuiting of mass-mediated images of the Muslim as a Terrorist articulates

the logic of disidentification. Muñoz describes this movement as "'making over'…,

the way a subject looks at an image that has been constructed to exploit and deny

identity and instead finds pleasure, both erotic and self-affirming" (1999: 72). With

wit and sarcasm, the singing subject embraces the objectified image of the

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[18] The observations of the similarities between The Kominas' "Sharia Law in the USA" and the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK" were first made by Daniel Kantorova's post on *Mideastyouth.com*, http://www.mideastyouth.com/2009/08/06/smash-the-last-idol-report-from-the-kominas-concert/ (accessed September 13, 2010).

[19] The Sex Pistols' song "Anarchy in the U.K." begins with the lyrics "I'm an anti-Christ / I'm an anarchist."

[20] The title of the first album *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay* exemplifies how the band takes the subject position of those deported, detained, excluded, or marginalized by the U.S. government.

threatening Terrorist-like Muslim masculinity. Another layer of joke perhaps points to how Sharia Law as a source of religious authority in the Islamic faith is recontextualized. Here it is utilized as an instance of punk anarchy. Singing, shouting, and slam-dancing, The Kominas highlights the absurdity of U.S. homeland security politics following the events on September 11, 2001, at the same time undercuts the religious authority of Islam.

Unfortunately, not everyone gets the joke. Mainstream press has excessively exaggerated The Kominas' affiliations to Islam. An article on *CNN.com* claims that three of the four members of the band "identify as Muslim—both practicing and non-practicing" (Ansari 2009). Out of annoyance and frustration, Basim sent a message to all his followers on Twitter, "That's funny. I told CNN we were three atheists and one Muslim, and they flipped it" (BasimBoyTellem 2009).

While Basim identifies with the anti-status-quo spirit of the taqwacore concept, he finds the mass-media-invented term "Muslim punk" repulsive. In an interview, he denounces the sensationalizing or "sexy" effect of "Muslim punk" in Western media (Rashid, et al. 2009). The attraction of "Muslim punk" is based on a preconceived contradiction within the term assumed by a perspective outside the Muslim (as well as South Asian and Arab) communities. Mainstream media capitalizes on this opposition in order to create formulaic and sensationalist headlines such as: "Allah, Amps, and Anarchy" in *Rolling Stone Magazine* (Serpick 2007); *Newsweek*'s "Slam-Dancing to Allah" (Philips 2007); The *Boston Globe*'s "The Clash: Punk Meets Islam in a Local Band That Slashes Stereotypes" (Sacirbey 2006); *CNN*'s "Punk Meets Islam for New Generation in U.S." (Ansari 2009); The *L.A. Times'*

"Nevermind the Islam. The Kominas Are Punk" (Abdulrahim 2009); and in the U.K. newspaper *The Sun*, "Never Mind the Burkas: Rockin'…Kominas in Boston at the Sad Cafe in Lowell…" (Iggulden 2007). The presupposed irreconcilability between Islam and punk is, I argue, based on the assumption that punk music is "Western," white, or American.[21] I blame Alan Waters, an anthropology professor at University of Massachusetts-Boston, who makes this very assertion in the *Associated Press'* story about The Kominas and other taqwacore-related bands. He said, "Punk rock is very American, and this is assimilation through a back door" (Contreras 2010). This assertion runs the risk of cultural chauvinism for laying claims on the social practice of playing rock music as being "American." This view not only ignores the historical British roots of punk rock (and its influences from West Indian immigrants in England). It also dangerously reinforces the Orientalist binary between "American" and "Muslim," as I discussed earlier. But how could a band that plays songs about suicide-bombing the Gap and instigating the Islamic Sharia Law in the United States be assimilationist? Neither Waters nor the *Associated Press* writer attempts to resolve this tension. In fact, no press has paid any serious attention to the band's music.

The Kominas also questions the centrality of Michael Muhammad Knight in the taqwacore narrative produced by North American mass media. Knight may have helped foster the taqwacore cultural space by putting a name to it, but according to Basim, who is close friends with Knight, the so-called "taqwacore" scene and the

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[21] Also, the punk-versus-Islam binary can further reinforced by Orientalist notions of ancientness and primitiveness of non-Western religions. More on this issue, see Maira 2009.

participants within it were already in existence prior to the media circulation and the invention of the term. Basim argues, "The racist media…can put MMK (Michael Muhammad Knight) in every story as the great white grandfather to this scene of confused, destructive Muslims who've turned around from their 'oppressive' culture. There's plenty of revolutionary South Asian hip-hop out there… CBC TV, the biggest broadcaster in Canada comes to us to cover us. The reason? A white man started all of it" (Rashid, et al. 2009). Basim's comment diagnoses the Euro-American-centric impulse to colonize the fertile creative grounds occupied by minority artists. Linking the press centrality on Knight to white racism, Basim intends to challenge the assumptions of the Anglo and white origins of taqwacore.

The Kominas' cynicism is not unfounded. The media has appropriated the image of the band and their associates under the banner of taqwacore for various rhetorical and political agendas. Backup vocalist Nyle Usmani captured this succinctly, "I'd like to thank 9/11. I wouldn't be here without you" (Abdulrahim, 2009). Like sharks, media outlets have preyed on the band's heritage connection to Islam as baits of media novelty. The press circulated the idea of taqwacore as "Muslim punk," without ever delving into the complex inter-ethnic relations and personal ambivalence to religion and culture within the band and the nascent taqwacore scene. I met with the members of the band at the South Street Diner, a few blocks away from the South Station in Boston. Over domestic beers and French fries, The Kominas unleashed their frustration. They complained about the rampant and shallow deployment of essentialist notions by media sensationalists. Shahjehan explained,

> We got to do a lot of cool stuff because of the novelty aspects of it, because of all the media shit. But it's difficult when that stuff happens right away, then you wonder if people are actually interested in it musically. Because a lot of songs on that album are pretty damned good songs, but if this whole other aspect to it wasn't there, you know like the Muslim, post-9/11 crap or whatever. People ask what taqwacore is. It's nothing more than a few kids that talk online. People think it's like this thing where we all hang out, we all sit around in this house (2009).

Since the formation of the band in 2006, mainstream media, music and non-music-related, has hovered around the existence of The Kominas while pigeonholing it as a cultural novelty. Shahjehan's grievance regarding "the Muslim, post-9/11 crap" sheds light on the discursive race-inflected sensationalism of the Islamic religion in the media after September 11. In *Missing* (2009), an ethnographic monograph about the post-9/11 South Asian Muslim American youth experience in the Boston suburbs, anthropologist Sunaina Maira observes a change in the racial dynamics in the post-9/11 United States. She asserts, "The primary fault lines are no longer just between those racialized as white Americans versus people of color, or even black versus white Americans, but between those categorized as Muslim/non-Muslim, Arab/non-Arab, and citizen/non-citizen" (2009: 232). In this environment, marginalized identities such as Muslim, Arab, immigrant, and South Asian are often conflated and jumbled up into one ambiguously generalized other, usually found demonized, romanticized, celebrated, or fictionalized in press media. For instance, *Rolling Stone Magazin*e erroneously describes The Kominas' South Asian musical influences as "Middle-Eastern melodies" (Serpick 2009).

At South Street Diner, every member of The Kominas spoke up. Everyone was equally vocal about his frustration with the press misrepresentations. Guitarist

Arjun expressed his dismay, specifically regarding the self-reproducibility of the

media:

> They all wrote their stories before they came to us. There's a gigantic media
> circle jerk around us that's so big, that they couldn't reach in with any other
> hand that they are not using and touch us anymore. The circle has gotten so
> big that the diameter has spread from the center. We're here in the middle of
> it. None of this stuff you're saying is true. You're writing each other's article
> for each other. And they interview us for like 5 minutes at a time (Khan, et al.
> 2009).

Arjun's brother Karna Ray, the drummer of The Kominas at the time of the

interview, added a nuanced metaphor:

> And there was this one show that we played at. There were cameras pointing
> at other cameras. If you think about it, it's basically like feedback that they're
> producing. The input and the output are just the same. And it's just going
> around, around, and around creating this immense noise. This momentous
> fucking structure of noise has nothing to do with us anymore (Khan, et al.
> 2009).

Karna's noise metaphor and Arjun's "gigantic media circle jerk" observation reflects

upon the shallow self-referentiality of contemporary media, especially in relation to

the Islamic faith and culture after September 11. Media produces more media. The

meaning of media is lost in the endless cycle of media reproductions. It seems as if

Arjun and Karna were paraphrasing French theorist Jean Baudrillard's concept of

simulacra (1994). The media creation around the taqwacore hype precisely

demonstrates the emptiness of meaning and the creation of a hyperreality in

contemporary media (1994).

From Multiculturalism to Polyculturalism

Arjun and Karna are not of Muslim background. Arjun told me that they are of Indian Bengali descent and their mother is Hindu. Their non-Muslim heritage is often overlooked in press media. Their presumed difference is sometimes subsumed under the multiculturalist banner of "diversity." *Rolling Stone Magazine's* article describes them as "Hindu dudes," implying a status peripheral to the "Muslim" members. Arjun wrote eloquently in a personal message over *Facebook*: "We would always find our points ignored and our 'diversity' noted as some kind of brownie badge on the Kominas lapel. Fuck that" (Khan, et al. 2009). During my interview at the South Street Diner, Arjun spoke about the "cuddly" effects of the multiculturalism intended by liberal press: "The thing is that they use me and Karna to make the whole thing a little cuddly because it's diversified. 'Oh there's a black dude in the band.' Dan. 'Oh there's two Bengali Hindus in the band.' 'Holy shit these Muslims must be really cool. They are all accepting. This brand of Islam, this revolution they're pushing for, this is it. This is what's going to change the religion.' We're not even a fucking part of that religion" (Khan, et al. 2009).

Arjun's remark about The Kominas' "diversified" interethnic membership resonates with Maira's observation of the multiculturalist absorption of "Islam as a marker of cultural difference…to expand the rainbow spectrum of diversity" (2009: 228). This process in turn depoliticizes the racial ideologies that govern the exclusion and marginalization of individuals of Muslim, South Asian, and Arab heritage in the United States. Anthropologist Shalini Shankar (2008) notes that the

diversity agenda assimilates and displays racial differences while effacing the backdrop of the racial order. "This norm of Whiteness is one on which multiculturalism is premised" (Shankar 2008: 122). Moreover, the celebratory, pro-diversity interpretation of The Kominas positions the band as being "cool" for supposedly promoting a progressive "brand of Islam." The ideological undertone is a binary that distinguishes between "good Muslims" versus the "bad Muslims." This binary demonizes those who are supposedly responsible for terrorism (Mandani 2004: 15; cited in Maira 2009: 235); at the same time, it claims those non-threatening Muslims as acceptable for practicing good (U.S. American) liberal multiculturalism.

The Kominas refuses to be subsumed under the U.S. rainbow of "good" ethnic minorities. With a name that means "scumbags" in Punjabi and Urdu, The Kominas does not pretend to be exemplary of a "good Muslim," according to any religious and social orthodoxy. Playing on the images of the "bad Muslim," while embracing the abject, a definitively punk ethos, the band enlists Terrorist metaphors in its songs: "Suicide Bomb the Gap", "Sharia Law in the USA," and "WalQueda Superstore."

Instead of a neo-liberal consumerist or a feel-good, apolitical version of U.S. multiculturalism, The Kominas appears to exemplify a kind of transgressive pluralism. It challenges the racial status-quo and builds solidarity across various social lines. This minority-centered multiculturalism, I argue, resonates with what historian Vijay Prashad terms as "polyculturalism" in his influential text *Everyone Was Kung Fu Fighting* (2001). In a cultural Marxist approach, Prashad offers a "polycultural" perspective that allows for the "the interchange of cultural forms"

instead of the multiculturalist view of "the world as already constituted by different

(and discrete) cultures that we can place into categories" (2001: 67).

Polyculturalism emphasizes moments of cultural confluence, particularly in context

of struggle against social injustice. It focuses on culture as a process, rather than

categories, with the goal to dismantle notions of cultural chauvinism, parochialism,

and ethno-nationalism.

During a phone conversation, I ask Basim what he would like the readers of

SPINearth, a music blog offshoot from the SPIN magazine, know about his band. He

said to me, very succinctly, "we're all about (forming) solidarity with all people of

color, reaching out to those in the wilderness of North America" (Usmani 2009b).

Embracing the collective abject of those around the band, I suggest, The Kominas

forges a D.I.Y. polyculturalist unity for a palliative end. In the following sections, I

identify two strands of The Kominas' polyculturalist affiliations.

A Para-Islamic Alliance

*At the St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church in D.C., wearing an

almost-foot-long purple Mohawk [Figure 2.7], Basim hops in front of the microphone.

He introduces his band by declaring: "It was interesting that when we saw the

Facebook listing* for New Muslim Cool*, we thought, 'those kids are 'New Muslim Cool'

and those (other) kids are 'bad Muslims.'" Basim chuckles and then says, "I'll let you

guys judge how bad we really are." This performance is an event offshoot from the

annual meeting of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and it coincides with

the screening of* New Muslim Cool *(Taylor 2009), a documentary film that follows the*

life of Puerto Rican American rapper Jason Hamza Pérez who became a devout Muslim activist after abandoning his former life as a drug dealer. Basim's statement not only draws distance from religiously exemplary story of Pérez; it also forewarns the audience, a multiethnic Muslim-majority group of youth [Figure 2.8], of The Kominas' "blasphemous" music. A few songs later, Shahjehan announces, "This song really scares the Republicans. This is called 'Sharia Law in the USA.'" The crowd cheers. Shahjehan stomps on his distortion effect pedal, letting his guitar ring with feedback. He tosses his head back and falls into the blissful feedback noise. He shapes the noise artfully and projected it with strength. I feel right there with him, emotionally, in that special moment where chaos and peace converge. Wearing a white kufi, a cap usually worn by Muslim people of African descent, especially in West Africa, drummer Imran raises his arm while holding a drumstick, like a flag. Shahjehan's guitar feedback bleeds into a larger bomb like noise created by the rest of the band. I see some members of the audience dropping their jaws or covering their mouths. They seem shocked by the song's daring lyrics. The others in the audience cheer on and slam-dance across the front of the stage.

As the night grows deeper, the Atlanta-based slam poet Amir Sulaiman takes center stage. A heavyset man wearing a black kufi cap, Amir tells his life stories of faith and struggles as a black Muslim living in the U.S. through his impassioned words. Waving his arm, he invokes these words, "I'm not dangerous. I am danger. I'm not fearful. I am fear." He showers the audience with his beads of sweat and heartfelt words, impelled by immense courage and conviction. The crowd draws closer to the stage and to the poet. The energy peaks at the end of the set when all the performers of

the evening join Amir. The members of the M-Team, a hip-hop duo comprised of two Muslim Latinos (Hamza Pérez's group) rap and exchange verses with Amir. The members of The Kominas get behind their instruments forming an army ensemble backing the poet and the hip-hop rhymers. A cross-genre jam, the song grows into a trance over the course of nine minutes, but it feels like an eternity. Amir Sulaiman chants the words, "AlHAMdulillah. HAMdulillah. HalleluJAH, yeah, HalleluJAH, yeah, Hallelujah," over strong and steady bass notes ascending and descending—all moving in synchronized cycles of ecstasy. The cliques break up and merge into one. Occupying the left side of the hall, the men, hip-hop-geared and kufi-capped, throw their arms up in bursts while swaying back and forth to Basim's undulating bassline. Loudly, they respond to Sulaiman's calling of "Alhamdulilah...Hallelujah...." Congregating the right side of the room, the women, some hijab-covered, add energy into the mix by cheering and chanting "Almaduliah... Hallelujah..." Absorbed by the rapturous moment, the punk slam-dancers transform their previously ska-skanking bodies into the slow-moving side-to-side wave. Sulaiman elates the crowd even more by showering them with the words, "I love you. I love you. I love you." The visceral and the emotional synergy are sustained by astounding collective power. Like everyone else, I am lost in a moment of blissful frenzy. After the set, I congratulate Shahjehan and then hug him. With teary eyes, he and I both agree that this experience is ineffable. I let the chant echo on.

Figure 2.7: Basim Usmani, St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C., July 4, 20009. Photography by author

Figure 2.8: The Kominas, St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C., July 4, 20009. Photography by author

In his powerful recitation, Amir Sulaiman syncopated his accents to the phrase "AlHAMdulillah. HAMdulillah. HalleluJAH, yeah, HalleluJAH, yeah, Hallelujah." The repetition of the sacred phrases and the rhythmic gaps created a familiar cue for a call and response between the poet and his audience. A term mostly used by Muslims, "Alhamdulillah" is an Arabic phrase meaning "praise to God." The meaning of "Alhamdulillah" is similar to that of "Hallelujah," the Latin transliteration of the Hebrew term for "praise Yahweh," used in the Christian context. Juxtaposing two phrases from two different religions—Islam and Christianity, Sulaiman conjured a symbolic inter-faith unity on stage inside the large activity room of the Latino church, in front of a multiethnic audience of myriad relationships to Islam.

The members of the Kominas did not compose their parts in the song. The band played the same progression as a looped instrumental track of piano, bass, and drum machine that I found in a Youtube video[22] of Sulaiman's performance of the song. At the off-ISNA show. The Kominas "rockified" their arrangement and infused it with an in-the-moment spontaneity. Throughout the course of the song, the band built performance energy in the room. Basim played a loop of syncopated bass notes ascending and descending around the fifth, sixth, seventh degree, and the tonic, while supporting the cycle of tension and resolution; Shahjehan and Elester Rechard, The Kominas trumpeter, played notes in a high register accenting the tonal ebbs and flows; Imran heightened the vigor by playing a drum fill at the end of each cycle. At the end of the chorus chant, Shahjehan signaled the start of the introspective section by a quickly skating and scraping his guitar strings, making a

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[22] "Amir Sulaiman – 'AlHamduLillah'. 'Spitting LIghtm Healing the Hood', Radical Middle Way – London." *Youtube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1TPestUjJw (accessed on September 9, 2010).

noisy glissando. The band quieted down and receded into the background during the rapid streams of recited words. It screamed loudly, echoing the emotional intensity of the poem during the chorus chant sections. The spontaneous torrent of energy and the musical affinity between the performers and the audience, and amongst the performers themselves, reminded me of the charismatic gospel preaching style in African American churches.

Not everyone in the audience "chorus," who zealously echoed the words of "Alhamdulillah…Hallelujah…," was Muslim. The crowd was divided into a few social clusters. A large group hip-hop-geared African American and Latino men took up about half of the audience. A small group of headscarf-cover women of Arabic heritage stood tightly next to one another near the front of the stage. A mixed-gendered, multiethnic group that appeared to be of predominately South Asian descent hovered in the front, standing close to the friends of the band. A few members of this mixed group had shirts that said "Pork Sucks." A group of African American women, some covered in hijab, scattered loosely across the back rows in the audience area. I, as the only individual of East Asian descent in the room, self-consciously tugged myself and my recording devices into The Kominas' friend circle, swinging my arms and slam-dancing throughout the evening. I noticed that the groups in the room all represented the social fringes of the ISNA, an organization that, according to Mike Knight, represents "the mainstream, very hygienic and very sterile form of Islam" in the U.S. (Majeed 2009). Basim told me, at the South Street Diner, that the organization has a predominately Arab membership, with the majority of the members being Shia Mulims. The organization has shown political

interests in Palestine and the Middle East, and very little interest in South Asian concerns such as the 1947 Partition of India (Khan, et al. 2009). Individuals of South Asian, African American, and Latino heritage and other Islamic sectarian affiliations such as Sunni (with which some members of The Kominas identify), as well as those of alternative identifications such as the Sufi Muslims, agnostics, atheists, rappers, and punks are minorities in the ISNA community. The event's off-site location at a Latino Church, away from the main ISNA convention site of the Washington D.C. Convention Center, I contend, signifies the alternative social status and interest of the show's participants.

At this show, the spatial rifts representing the social tensions among these differently marginalized groups vanished by the end of the evening. The slam dancers were bouncing back and forth like the hip-hop crew. In a chorus, and in unison, everyone threw up their arms and shouted back the inter-faith message ""Alhamdulillah...Hallelujah...", regardless of his or her faith. Everyone swayed. Every individual knew the moment was special. This event was not about division. It was about union, a union among all the social outcasts within and around the American Muslim communities and within the larger U.S. society. Indeed, in performance, The Kominas symbolized the exemplary "bad Muslims" that contributed to the creation of this spectacular social unity among a very mixed crowd.

In his novel *Osama Van Halen*, Mike Knight lists the Sufis, the converts among lower-caste Hindus, Turkish nomads, and Subharan Africans, and other fringe

unorthodox Islamic practices in North America that have been swept under the rug

by Arab Muslim cultural elites:

> It also happened in the wilderness of North America, where Islam took new forms—irrefutably black, with its own black scriptures, black symbols and black holy men... This black Islam even spawned strange culture seeds; from the Moorish Science Temple came the Moorish Orthodox Church, with opium-waltzing Walid al-Taha and his student Hakim Bey using 'the black man's code to fit their facts,' as Norman Mailer said of the Kerouacs and Ginsbergs. Many these days would also view the Progressive Islam scene as a homegrown heresy, and American Muslim women have fired the first shots to create a whole other Islam for themselves. And now even the bums and punks are starting to stand up on the margins—kids like the Kominas' Basim and dead zombie Shahjehan—to claim their corner (2009: 68-9).

Similarly, The Kominas looks to these sites of social transgressions to create an

alternative cultural space around orthodox Islam. The band is behind the mission of

building networks among individuals in the fringes, regardless of their idiosyncratic

relationship to the contemporary Islamic orthodoxy.

The Kominas shatters the stereotype that music is forbidden according to

some extreme interpretations of the Islamic law upheld by Western, non-Muslim

groups (Blumenfield 2007: 210-1). The existence of Qawwali, Sufi poetry, and now

The Kominas and other Taqwacore-affiliated groups opposes this shallow

assumption. Basim said in the CNN interview, "We aren't [just] some alternative to a

stereotypical Muslim. We actually might be offering some sort of insights for people

at large about religion, about the world" (Ansari 2009). In his interview with The

Kominas, Hussein Rashid, scholar of Islam and American religious life, employs the

term "Islamicate" to refer to "things that may be influenced by Islam, but are not

necessarily religious" to describe the band's music (Rashid, et al. 2009). I agree with

Rashid. I would call The Kominas's worldview a "para-Islamic" perspective. The

prefix "para" refers to the position of being alongside, or closely related to. I argue,

The Kominas' music critically engages with the cultural, social, and political milieux

around and *alongside* Islam. The Kominas' music does touch on topics related to

Islam, specifically how it's experienced, perceived, translated, exoticized, and

excluded. But it does not embody any degree of perceivable religiosity within the

Islamic faith, as the press has (mis)construed. This approach, I argue, deliberately

occupies a middle space between religiosity and agnosticism. This space of

ambiguity generates discomfort and anxiety for many, conservatives, liberals, the

Christian fundamentalists in the U.S.,

The members of The Kominas insist upon a holistic, polyculturalist view of

Islamic cultures: They push the edges of public consciousness, reminding everyone

that Islam is not just one religion, generalized, flattened, antithetical to "Western"

values and culture. They daringly reveal the fringes of how these living cultures

associated with Islam intersect with issues of race, ethnicity, nationality,

globalization, war, politics, media, pop culture, sexuality, humanism, humor,

alienation, love, and other facets of culture and humanity. Retaining a multitude of

differences within and around the cultures of Islam, The Kominas's musical dissent

challenges the world to wrestle with the profundity of religion and the inequities of

life. In doing so, the band reaches out to those alienated in the wilderness.

A "Brown"-identified Polyculturalist Social Conglomerate

The Kominas embraces a multiplicity of racial and ethnic otherness—such as

South Asian, brown, Muslim, and Pakistani—in its self-created discourse. This

multiplicity has created amorphous, but powerful social resonances for its fans and friends. This ethnic ambiguity brilliantly promotes a minoritarian social inclusion. The band, in its social identifications, evokes a *brown-and-punk* continuum akin to the taqwacore subaltern spirit. The Kominas mobilizes this discursive complex in order to unify a conglomerate of fringe social groups. This brown-and-punk conglomerate points at a polyculturalist solidarity with those who fall outside of the white norms (and the US American black-white racial binary) in rock music-culture and by extension, in the U.S. and global society: Indians, Pakistanis, Latinos/Chicano punks, Afro-punks, Native Americans, Sri-Lankans, Southeast Asians, West Indians, Sufis, Arabs, Taqwacores, Muslims, immigrants, migrant workers, socialists, queers, the disabled, and other "others." Invoking an inclusivist punk brownness, The Kominas makes clear its home-base identification in the South Asian and punk worlds. Declaring its status as a minority within a minority group, The Kominas branches out to touch those who are similarly marginalized within the society.

The Kominas frequently associates with other non-South-Asian minority musical groups.[23] The band is in close contact and has shared a stage with a number of musicians and groups associated with Afro-punk: Amul 9 from Atlanta, GA and Sean Padilla, also known as the Cocker Spaniels, now living in Austin, TX. In

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[23] The Kominas made a short video satirizing American xenophobia and racism against "ethnic Americans" such as themselves and Mexican immigrants. Using jingoist imagery such as American fast food and mall culture, and conservative media rhetoric including "American responsibility," "collateral damage," and "support for the Taliban," the video marks "Ethno-Americans"—specifically, The Kominas, Das Racist, and Mexican immigrant workers in the food service industry—racially distinct from the right-wingers' ideal "America." See video, KTV, 2009. "Ethni-American Musicians Tackle Important Issues in America", Youtube, December 4. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MiiQwwgPLpA (accessed September 16, 2010).

addition, Basim devoted a session of his online radio podcast series Basim's Goth

Hour to the music of Afro-punk.[24]

Even more notable is the band's connection to the Latino punk social

contingent. In the liner notes of *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay*, written on the

bottom of the page in fine print, I found a sentence written entirely in Spanish: "para

todos mis carnales cafes del mundo que chinga su madre el gobierno americano y

que viva la raza." This message suggests an anti-U.S.-government stance: "For all my

brown brothers in the world, fuck you, American government and long live, the

people." From my bilingual Chicano friend, I learned that the phrase "carnales cafes"

("brown brothers") does not exist in formal Spanish. The contestational statement

"viva la raza," meaning "long live the people," is a common phrase used by

individuals of Mexican descent. My guess is that The Kominas employs a literal

translation of the self-invented term "brown brothers" to forge an alliance with

Mexican and other Latino immigrants over a shared "brown" identity. It wasn't until

I went to The Kominas's first show that I got a better sense of what this cross-ethnic

alliance may mean.

In a musty basement, I am caught in the middle of a swirling crowd of sweaty

bodies. This is Nick's Basement, two blocks away from the University of Massachusetts

Lowell campus. Los Bungalitos, a local punk band, blasts its distorted power chords

out of a beat up Marshall amp. Shouting words in English and Spanish, the hardcore

vocalist hypes the crowd, combusting the basement with energy and making the walls

shake. In a conversation over the loud hardcore band, Shahjehan screams into my ear,

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[24] Basim's Goth Hour podcast, special Afro-punk edition is posted here http://blip.tv/file/2691651 (access September 20, 2010).

"The singer of Los Bungalitos is incredible. I love this band!" During the Los Bungalitos'

set, the members of The Kominas set up their equipment. Shahjehan stands facing a

short stack of guitar amplifier speaker cabinet while tuning his guitar. His black kurta

with gold embroidery sticks out in a sea of guitar mohawks, dim lights, skinny jeans,

hoody sweatshirts with patches, guitar feedback, beers, grunts, chants, sweat,

handmade merchandise and zines, fists of camaraderie, etc. In "Blow Shit Up," a

bilingual song with Spanish verses, Basim repeats the lines, "I don't want assimilation

/ I just want to blow shit up," over and over again. Jumping, shouting and body-surfing,

the members of the band prance around the stage area of the basement and then

lunge into the audience, celebrating a co-presence with their compatriots on a burst of

adrenaline.

The Spanish verse of the song is an excerpt from "A Las Barricadas," a well-known tune of the Spanish Anarchists during the Spanish Civil War. With a punk association, this anti-establishment fight song has been covered by many artists including Brazilian hardcore band Juventude Maldita and Estonian punk band Vennaskond.[25] In writing the lyrics of the song, Arjun borrows only the first stanza of the original version: "Negras tormentas agitan los aires, nubes obscuras los impieden ver, aounke los espere el delore la muerte contro el enimigo los yama el deber." In its English translation, the passage paints a dark imagery of war and a sense of urgency for a battle.[26] The Spanish verse allows Spanish-speaking Latino

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[25] More on the history of the poem, read "A Las Barricadas," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A_las_Barricadas&oldid=421875429 (accessed on April 2, 2011).

[26] The verse translates into English as, "The black storms agitate the airs / The dark clouds impede our view / Even death and pain wait for us / Duty calls against our enemy." The Kominas' written lyrics,

individuals a unique cultural vantage point. This privilege could be read as an instance of social bridging between the brown-identified South Asians and Latinos and Latinas in the United States. Potentially, this social bond could yield political implications, especially considering the conservative U.S.American anti-immigrant attitude regarding speaking Spanish in public. I argue that this bilingual anti-assimilationist articulates the position of two subaltern groups in the current United States political landscape: the Spanish-speaking Latino/a immigrants and the individuals of Muslim, South Asian, and Arab descent who run the risk of being stereotyped as bomb-throwing terrorists. Uniting the two enemy groups of the state could be a response to the so-called "the Al-Qaedization of Latino identity": a political process that fosters a conservative and near white-supremacist homeland security culture, lumping the "bad" Latinos with "terrorist threat" (Lovato 2006); slandering radical Chicano activists as "'America's Palestinians' [who] are gearing up a movement to carve out the southwestern United States… meeting continuously with extremists from the Islamic world" (Mariscal 2005: 43; cited in Maira 2009: 244). In its song "Blow Shit Up," The Kominas sides with the radical voices among the Latino/a immigrant community. The band embodies an inter-ethnic "brown" activist-driven identity. Maira describes this kind of polyculturalist affiliation as being based in a "shared political relationship to the nation-state rather than a shared identity based on culture or color" (2008, 180).

Charging forward with loud and aggressive music, at the basement show, The Kominas led a multiethnic crowd to throw up their fists and shout "oi-oi-oi!" In

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however, contain some spelling errors. I consider those errors a result of colloquializing the poem.

doing so, the band radically removed the punk anthemic "Oi!" shout of its historical association with the working class and white-supremacist punk skinheads in the United Kingdom.[27] For the here and now inside Nick's Basement in Lowell, and around in The Kominas's social sphere, the band's unique "Oi!" carried an anti-racist and anti-U.S.-assimilation resonance. Embracing the abject in the style of punk, The Kominas's Oi! shout-out reached those fellow minority youth, some of whom were brown Latinos, others were brown Asians.

Conclusion

Cultural otherness has become a form of "multicultural capital" (Bryson, 1996) that present-day indie rockers consume and invest in. This is in part a reflection of the demographics of the indie rock scene participants: the majority is white, college-educated, upper-middle class men and some women. In response, American musicians of Asian descent deploy creative strategies to exploit, contest, circumvent, or transform ethnic signifiers looming over their presence in the scene while locating a moment of agency as ethnic minorities.

The case studies of Kathi Ko, Carol Bui, and The Kominas offered, to this point in the dissertation, have hopefully illustrated some of the complex ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class intersect in the social and musical lives of Asian American indie rock musicians. Kathi's active alliance with the Riot-Grrrl women-centered punk rock music scenes provides an implicit critique of the

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[27] Read more about Oi!, "Oi!", *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Cite&page=Oi!&id=425725816 (accessed on April 24, 2011.)

late-capitalist multiculturalist ideology that commodifies ethnic otherness. Carol

appropriates Arabic music and middle-eastern female sexuality in order to

circumvent the exoticization of the Asian female body and sexuality often found in

the ostensibly innocuous indie rock music press. Through their music-making and

scene involvement, both women recontextualize and subvert commonplace,

stereotypical conceptions, sound and image of Asian femininity. In doing so, they

yield a creative output unique to their own dispositions and immediate

surroundings. The Kominas embodies the punk anti-establishment ethos to

challenge the essentialist notions affiliated with South Asian and Muslim identities

after September 11th. The band brings together various contestational micro-

universes among minority groups via a polyculturalist, brown, pro-immigrant

identification. These case studies, in juxtaposition, also mark a further gender and

ethnic distinction in the experiences of multiculturalism: from the East and

Southeast Asian American and female perspective versus the South Asian American

male perspective. These differences will continue to be explored from a different

angle in the remaining chapters of this dissertation. The Kominas will reappear in

chapter four in a discussion about the band's efforts to engage like-minded

individuals across regional and national borders.

To conclude, these three musician-based case studies resonate with historian

Vijay Prashad's critique of the late-capitalist liberal multiculturalism in the United

States. "We're now fed with a diet of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity. The

history of oppression and the fact of exploitation are shunted aside in favor of a

celebration of difference and the experience of the individual can narrate their

ethnicity for the consumption of others" (2001: 63). Kathi, Carol, and The

Kominas'ss experiences challenge the celebratory, liberal "illusion of autonomy"

promised by the do-it-yourself ethos in the indie rock music discourse (Hibbett,

2005). Not everyone can perform his or her "autonomous" D.I.Y. agency on an equal

playing field. In the case of the musicians in this project – it is a particular kind of

agency that is strengthened by reflexivity, self-reinvention, and a conviction to

transgress.

Chapter 3: Traversing Transnational Ethnic Politics with Erhu-Rock:
The Case of The Hsu-nami

At Highline Ballroom, one of New York City's high-profile music venues, multicolored stage lights shifted in formation according to the hi-energy performance of the progressive erhu rock band, The Hsu-nami. Jack Hsu exchanged solos with lead guitarist Brent Bergholm, while shredding on his amplified erhu *– a two-string spike fiddled that originated in China. Clipped onto his waist, Jack's erhu looked like an electric guitar. Jack and Brent moved toward each other to lean back to back, and finished the song by playing the chorus melody.   Brent announced, "we're going to take this song to the people of Taiwan." The crowd cheered and applauded. Jack and Brent told me they had been surprised to see that some of the older Taiwanese in the audience had tears in their eyes while Jack played his* erhu *solo.*

The Hsu-nami's set warmed up the audience for the evening's headliner, Chthonic, an extreme metal band from Taiwan. On stage, the lead vocalist Freddy Lim of Chthonic alternated his guttural screams with his band mate's somber erhu *solos. Only the young white metal fans in the audience, many of whom had followed the band up and down the East Coast, knew that Freddy's virtuosic but unintelligible vocalizations were narrating stories inspired by Taiwanese mythologies. The young metal fans banged their heads in synch to the machine-gun-like guitar riffs and the rapid firing on the double-bass drums and bass guitar. Wincing to the assaulting sounds, the older Taiwanese, some with improvised tissue-paper earplugs, stood in the crowd with stiff limbs and torsos attempting to show support for the band.*

An unusual performance: middle-aged Taiwanese men and women don't tend to go to rock music shows and socialize with young, black-T-shirt-wearing, white American metal-heads. For The Hsu-nami and particularly Jack, who is Taiwanese American, this performance was the beginning of their unexpected entanglement in the complex transnational politics among Taiwan, China, and the U.S. Unwittingly Jack and his band-mates found themselves thrown into the mix of a Taiwanese nationalist protest spearheaded by event organizers and Chthonic. For Chthonic and their band leader Freddy, this high-profile event offered an opportunity to propagate a politics-laden brand of Taiwanese identity to a North American and global audience. Despite these differences, both bands share affiliations with the island of Taiwan, however differently these links may have been forged. Musically, with the incorporation of the *erhu*, both groups push against the aesthetic boundaries of rock music, as often articulated in ethnic, racial, and national terms.

This chapter follows the story of Taiwanese American Jack Hsu and his North-Jersey-based band The Hsu-nami, and examines their experiences of performing in various transnational situations fraught by the geopolitics among China, Taiwan, and the United States. This discussion explores the identities and ideologies related to ethnicity, race, and aesthetics that emerge and submerge in the musical performances of The Hsu-nami (and of Chthonic by a way of comparison). Following Purkayastha's (2005) nuanced work on the ethnic negotiations by second-generation South Asian Americans, this chapter considers transnationality as a key context of identity reconfigurations in the present day. Purkayastha's

framework "envision[s] ethnicity as expressing a state of balance between constraints and opportunities arising out of multiple nations" (2005: 14). Her work also connects expressions of ethnicity to the processes of racialization and situates the analysis within the racial politics of the United States (2005: 9-10).

In the following pages, I will discuss how Jack Hsu, alongside his white American band-mates, leverage and disrupt the binary between "Chinese" and "Taiwanese," and between "Asian" and "American." The close readings of performances and the surrounding discourse will examine how the band harnesses creative strategies and adapts to the changing politicized contexts associated with their presence. First, the analysis will highlight key moments of The Hsu-nami's engagement with Taiwanese nationalism via their contact with Chthonic. This analysis will be followed by an interpretation of the respective role of the *erhu* in these two bands. In this section, I will analyze the processes of Jack's creative construction of a unique "erhu rock" sound and genre. The next section will explore Jack's personal ambivalence and struggle with the complex transnational politics among China, Taiwan, and Taiwanese America. Following an analysis of press and media controversy around The Hsu-nami's airplay at the Olympics, the chapter will end with a note on Jack's deployment of the metaphor of cultural diplomacy, in light of the polarizing and pigeonholing forces impinging upon his band.

A Contact with Chthonic and Their Brand of Taiwanese Nationalism

The performance at Highline Ballroom was organized by the Committee for Admission of Taiwan to the United Nations, abbreviated as CATUN. According to

CATUN's website, the organization was "established through Taiwanese American

Council of Greater New York representing more than 10 Taiwanese American

organizations in the area." Since its inception in 1992, CATUN has organized an

annual mass rally during the assembly of the United Nations every September,

protesting the exclusion of Taiwan from the United Nation. A summary of the recent

history of Taiwan and its fraught relations with China and the United States can help

contextualize the politics surrounding the event.

When the Communist Party took Mainland China in 1949, the oppositional

Chinese Nationalist Party known as the Kuomintang (or KMT) fled to Taiwan. Under

the military rule of KMT leader Chiang Kai-Shek, Taiwan was considered a sovereign

nation and a part of the United Nations until 1978. After 1978, The U.S. and the U.N.

sought to rebuild relations with China by adhering to the "One-China" policy

enforced by the Chinese government. In the late 1980s, Taiwan formed a two-party

democracy, split between those wanting reconciliation with China and those

supporting Taiwanese independence. The KMT has maintained its position of

supporting reconciliation with China, whereas the newly formed oppositional party

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has mobilized for a pro-Taiwanese-

Independence movement. Since then, polarizing issues regarding a "Taiwanese"

identity have shaped the island's cultural and political landscape at home and

abroad (Hsu and Sargent 2008: 39-40).

The Taiwanese American political group CATUN organized this performance

event as an after-party following the 2007 protest rally against the U.N.. This event

served to introduce the Taiwanese band Chthonic on its North American tour to the

Taiwanese American community in the greater New York metropolitan area. The

organizers of CATUN invited The Hsu-nami to perform as a local, supporting act,

hoping to draw a young local audience. This performance, to The Hsu-nami, meant

an exposure of their music outside their usual fan-base consisting of 20-something-

year-old Ramapo College graduates, Taiwanese students studying abroad in the

New York metropolitan area, as well as friends and families of the band members.[28]

According to Jack, The Hsu-nami was particularly excited about sharing the stage

with a band from Taiwan. And along his band-mates, Jack hoped that his band would

eventually tour Taiwan, through this performance connection.

Chthonic's explicit support for Taiwanese independence facilitated the

political aims of CATUN. On stage, Freddy shouted into the microphone, "Fuck

China, fuck U.N." Chthonic's metal-head fans, who seemed to know the script,

responded by screaming back exactly the same phrases. Freddy managed to stir up

the 40-year-old-and-above Taiwanese rally-goers in the audience to shout out these

political slogans with a metal-inspired vengeance.[29] Freddy said to the crowd, 'The

U.N. considers themselves to represent all nations of the world. But Taiwan is

limited [of] its membership, so Taiwan represents the underworld, like you guys!"

Resonating with the word "underworld," the crowd cheered. Drawing on the Greek

term "chthonic," meaning deities or spirits of the underworld, Freddy analogizes the

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[28] Through playing several Taiwanese-themed events such as the annual Passport to Taiwan culture fest, The Hsu-nami have picked up fans in the community of Taiwanese students who are studying abroad in the New York metropolitan area. Many of these individuals belong to the organization FTSANY (Federation of Taiwanese Student Association in New York).

[29] It's important to note that there are pro-reconciliation (with China) members of the Taiwanese community in the New York City area. But it's not likely that they were present at this show because of the overtly pro-independence nature of the event.

dark, pagan-inspired black-metal imagery with the invisible status of Taiwan in the eyes of the United Nations.

Pumping his left fist in the air, Freddy shrieked the lyrics of the song "Unlimited Taiwan" in English while head-banging between the verses: "We have the land, the strength, the power / Rise up, overcome, take it over / Ignored too long, we became stronger / Tear down the walls and let us run over." A few months prior to the event, Chthonic announced the name of their tour to North America and Europe as the "UNlimited" Tour. The band even named the CATUN performance in New York as the "UNlimited New York Concert" and publicized it to the American press. Chthonic's official band website states the intention of the term: "We want to emphasize the 'Unlimited' potential of Taiwan and the Taiwanese people. We also want to highlight 'UN Limited Taiwan,' an endeavor to strongly protest how the UN limits Taiwan's full participation as an independent country."[30] In a short promotion film for the tour, the playback of the song "UNlimited Taiwan" is mashed with a video collage consisting of historical footage of the pro-independence "democratization" movement and an animation illustrating the exclusion of Taiwan from both the U.N. and the W.H.O. (Chthonic 2007b). Chthonic has personal and financial ties to the pro-Taiwan independence and anti-China political party known as the Democratic Progressive Party (or DPP). In fact, the DDP-leaning administration led by Taiwan's president at the time Chen Shui-Bian provided

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[30] This mission statement is stated on Chthonic's official band website in both English and Chinese (Chthonic 2007a).

partial financial support for Chthonic's tour of North America and Europe (Frazier

2007).[31]

Performing for a non-Taiwanese, "global" audience, Chthonic consciously

crafts and delivers its politicized, local "Taiwanese" identity in order to disseminate

its nationalist message to the global popular music market and the overseas

Taiwanese community. They do so by appropriating images and sounds from the

literary, religious, and musical practices associated with the notions of

Taiwaneseness. Chthonic "Taiwan-izes" the Northern European black metal sound

and performance practice to fit its nationalist agenda. On stage, Freddy and his

band-mates wore black-metal-inspired white face-paint with black accents in areas

around the eyes and mouth. In interviews and on their band website, Chthonic

reclaims the practice of "corpse paint" from Norwegian black metal by adding some

stylistic influences of the "8 Generals" face-paint from Taiwanese folk Taoism

[Figure 3.1].

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[31] The funding came from the Government Information Office of Taiwan, according to journalist Pat Kao of *Taiwan Review*. This article also sheds lights on the politicized role of Chthonic within New Taiwanese Songs movement of the early 1990s, which used pop songs to explore and comment on social issues and, more indirectly, politics" (Kao 2008).

Figure 3.1: Chthonic. Press photo. Courtesy of artist.

To the English-language press, Chthonic tirelessly explains the purpose and content of these "Taiwanese" signifiers and positions them as being "local," in opposition from the now globalized popular music formula. In the coffee bar outside of his rock music club The Wall in Taipei, Freddy explained to me his concept of the local in his band. He said, "this idea of the local is our winning ticket in the international pop music arena. The basic structure of metal is not going to change. You still use modern instruments and songwriting techniques, for example, 3-to-7-minute song length, verse-chorus-verse structure, instruments like guitars and drums. The bottom line is the idea. An idea is a way for others to enter your story" (Hsu and Sargent 2008: 42). In his remark, Freddy comments on the local

Taiwanese elements of his band as an exotic adornment, a marketing devise to differentiate his band from the European and American metal bands in the international music market. In short, Freddy knows his audience; and he knows how to appeal to them.

Chthonic: Harnessing the Exotic *Erhu*, Branding a Nationalist Identity

Su-Nung looked subdued, holding the erhu *while gazing at the floor and standing still next to Chthonic's head figure Freddy and bassist Doris Yeh in the limelight. Su-Nung's overshadowed stage appearance corresponded to his peripheral position in Chthonic's music throughout the set. Most of the time, he played parts doubling the chromatic fuzz-driven guitar and the synthesized orchestral strings generated by the keyboardist. Every now and then, Su-Nung's* erhu *came into the foreground articulating slow, melodic solos in a pentatonic or minor scale.*

Regarding Chthonic's double-bill with The Hsu-nami, Freddy said, "It's exciting that we can play with a different genre of rock band with the same Oriental instrument... I believe it's a good opportunity for all fans to discover new kinds of music" (Blabbermouth 2007). Freddy's word choice of "Oriental" resonates with the language used in other press materials. In the official version of the band's English biography, Chthonic describes the addition of the "Taiwanese traditional two-string violin" as an "Oriental twist."[32] In my interview with him, Freddy expounds that the

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[32] This version of the band biography was originally posted on the band's official website [http://chthonic.org] but has been replaced by a new version recently. This version, however, is still used on the band's Facebook page (Chthonic 2008).

erhu's sad melodies and "exotic" timbre serve the purpose of drawing the listener

into the narrative of the music (Lim 2008).

I argue that the *erhu* in Chthonic's music serves as a musical ornament to

endorse Freddy's pro-Taiwan independence agenda. Sonically, the sad and exotic

sound of the *erhu* signifies the vulnerable, powerless, and often feminized position

of Taiwan, *vis a vis* the masculinist political and military threat of China. In many of

Chthonic's songs, the *erhu* frequently joins the ethereal female vocals to highlight

the somber, melancholy aspects of the music. The last track of Chthonic's widely

distributed album *Seediq Bale* (2006) "Quasi Putrefaction" is about the calamitous

aftermath followed by the massacre of the Native Taiwanese by the Japanese

colonial military. This song exemplifies the gendered and ethnicized trope of the

erhu. After two verses of aggressive "hard" sections comprised of the growling male

vocals, double-bass drums, along with the rapid and punchy guitar armed with a

harsh distortion, the *erhu* enters into the foreground of the mix. Su-Nung's minor-

sounding *erhu* solo, coupled with Doris' vocals, offers a "soft", melodic counterpart

to the "hard," aggressive, and fast rhythm-driven metal sound [Audio Example 3.1].

The band uses this "hard vs. soft" gendered dichotomy to parallel the extreme

tension between the violence and grief related to the colonial bloodbath committed

by the Japanese military upon the Native Taiwanese people.

In all official press material, Chthonic uses the term "hena" to refer to the

vertically played two-string bowed instrument otherwise known as the *erhu*. The

differences between *hena* and *erhu* raise questions revolving a cluster of ethnic

meanings attached to the instrument. The *erhu* shares its Central Asian origins with

other similarly constructed spike fiddles grouped under the term *huqin*. The term

erhu refers to the instrument's contemporary form, a product of early 20th-century

innovation and standardization of the *huqin* family.[33] Over the last three centuries,

musicians in Taiwan have adapted the instrument and developed its variations (Lui

2007: 435). After consulting with my Taiwanese-speaking families and friends, I

found that the word "hena" spells similarly to "hian-a," phonetically transliterated

from the term 弦仔 in the Taiwanese/Holo dialect. During an Internet chat session,

Su-Nung explained to me that *erhu* and *hian-a* are almost used synonymously in

Taiwan (Chao 2009). He said, "I call my instrument 二胡 [*erhu*] in Chinese, but if I

need to describe what I play in the Taiwanese or Holo dialect, I would call my

instrument 弦仔 [*hian-a*]." Su-Nung also explained that *hian-a* is typically used as an

accompaniment instrument for Taiwanese folk opera style *Ko-a-hi* (歌仔戲; or

"gezaixi" in Pinyin).[34]

I interpret Freddy's deliberate adherence to the Taiwanese pronunciation

hena (or *hian-a*) as a conscious rejection of the instrument's Chinese affiliations and

signifiers. By insisting on the Taiwanese/Holo terminology, thus associating it with

the Taiwanese folk opera style *Ko-a-hi*, Freddy self-consciously infuses

"Taiwaneseness" into his band's brand identity. Exotifying its "local" affiliations,

Chthonic transforms its music and image into a global currency with a difference

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[33] The origins of huqin in central Asia are associated with the ethnic minority Xi people who moved to and settled in China in the 10th century (Wikipedia, December 7, 2009). And the modern innovation of the instrument was motivated by the performers and arrangers such as Liu Tianhua who was trained in western classical violin (Trasher and Stock, December 7, 2009).

[34] Su-Nung also explained the terminological differences: Technically, the term "erhu" refers to *nan-hu* (南胡), an instrument rarely used in *Ko-a-hi*. And "hian-a" refers to either *jing-hu* (京胡) or kezixian (殼子弦) (2009).

marked by an "eastern" or "Oriental" ethnicity. Flaunting this difference in the face

the international metal music market dominated today by Europe and North

America, Chthonic shines like an exotic gem from the east.

<u>Jack Hsu: Constructing an "Erhu Rock" Genre</u>

Back in New York City's Highline Ballroom. Toward the end of Hsu-nami's set,

the band quieted down unexpectedly. The stage darkened. Stage Lights focused on

Jack while he played fast a tremolo, bowing and whipping his erhu *strings. "Horse*

Race" (in Mandarin Chinese "Sai Ma") was the name of the tune. This tune resonated

among the Taiwanese audience members as they zealously clapped along to the steady

8th note beat on the bass drum. As Jack's erhu *solo ascended tonally reaching the*

climax of the song, the audience's participatory clapping grew more present and

joined the drummer's heavy strikes on the floor tom drum. It felt like an amplified

Chinese music ensemble inside a rock music venue. An "arena-rock" classical Chinese

music concert? The synchronized sounds rang thunderously through the hall. The

audience's clapping united those on stage with those in the audience, and most

certainly also united the Taiwanese rally-goers and the young white metal-heads.

Jack's version of the mid-20th-century Chinese *erhu* standard "Horse Race"

exemplifies his self-invented "erhu-rock" style. Conservatory-trained in Western

classical violin and erhu, Huang Haihuai wrote "Sai Ma" [usually translated as

"Horse Race" in English] in 1959. This tune is said to "depict the grand occasion of

horse races at a festival in Inner Mongolia" (Hanshin Ensemble, Pai, and Heller

2002). Ethnomusicologist Jonathan Stock groups this composition with mid-20th -

century works that evoke extra-musical imagery of the ethnic minority groups in China such as "Mongols and others from the grasslands of the north and west" (1992: 62). Incorporating folk music and regional styles associated with the northern and western territory of China, these *erhu* compositions helped disseminate the socialist ideal of proletarianism central to the vision upheld by the Chinese Communist government (1992: 62-70).

Without having any previous knowledge of the historical context of the composition, Jack translates rock guitar virtuosity—with emphasis on speed and strength—into his playing of a two-string spike fiddle. At an extremely fast tempo, Jack's accelerated fingering races through the tune in less than 2 minutes. He subdivides the finger-picking section into a stream of plucked 8th note patterns [Figure 3.2]. This rhythmic subdivision expedites the flow of the melody. Conventionally, "Horse Race" ends with a coda that calls for the technique of "linked, pausing bow" – a combination of "simultaneous tremolo bowing of both strings with a trill and glissando" (Stock 1992, 74) – to imitate horse neighs. Jack transforms this novel, almost comedic programmatic musical moment into a virtuosic erhu-rock shredding solo. "For the thrill of it," according to Jack, he accelerates the trills while exerting pressure onto the strings, turning the jagged sound of a horse-neigh into a loud, continuous scream. Contrary to most other performances of "Horse Race,"[35]

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[35] There have been several notable performances of "Horse Race" that I used in the comparison with Jack's performance. Among these performances is the recording by Pong Hsin-Chang and the Hanshin Chinese Folk and Dance Ensemble (2002). On this recording, the tempo is set at quarter note = 152 beats/minute. I also analyzed many other performances of "Horse Race" available on *Youtube*. A notable one among American audiences is the performance of Chinese piano virtuoso with his father Guoren Lang at the Carnegie Hall in 2007. Here the tempo is set between 170-176 beats/minute. Jack's performance at the Highline Ballroom at quarter note = 192 beats/minute, exceeds the tempo of all of both these performances, along with others on *Youtube*.

Jack's version crashes and burns while riding on excessive tempo fluctuations.

Creating an almost-uncontrollable intensity, it finishes in the style of a climactic

rock-star ending.

Figure 3.2: Jack Hsu, Taiwanese Welcome Party, Don Hill's Club, New York City, September 26, 2008. Photograph by author.

I asked Jack about the band's motivation behind playing this song. He said,

"It's all about the crowd." At first I thought that he was referring to the ethnic

composition of the audience. When I pressed him further, Jack explained that he

generally uses this tune as a solo to excite the crowd. Jack expressed that the tune is

not particularly "ethnic" to him. Jack is uninterested in referring this tune to its

Chinese or even Mongolian origins. In his personalized erhu-rock version, Jack

infuses influences from his favorite rock virtuosos, such as Swedish guitarist Yngwie

Malmsteen, into the melody of the Chinese *erhu* composition (Hsu 2009). To Jack,

"Horse Race" serves the function of displaying his technical capability on the *erhu*

showcasing his branded virtuosic erhu-rock style.[36]

Adapting rock guitar virtuosity, Jack employs his unique erhu-rock

techniques as a means to introduce the instrument to a multi-ethnic U.S. audience,

who is presumably already familiar with rock music performances. Jack's self-

invented style, I argue, embraces and popularizes the ethnic affiliations of the *erhu*

within predominately Euro-American rock music contexts. In doing so, unwittingly

perhaps, he subscribes to the values of individualism and populism endorsed and

celebrated by rock music performers and audiences (Keightly 2001). Contrary to

Chthonic, Jack Hsu is not interested in exoticizing or particularizing his instrument

as an ethnically minority object. The Hsu-nami's erhu-rock sound seeks to

universalize the erhu, infusing it with rock gestures and attitudes.

Jack has made a number of modifications to transform his instrument into an

electric-guitar-like object. Through trial and error and a do-it-yourself approach,

Jack has tested several methods of amplification combining various microphones

and amplifiers. He has attached a microphone pick-up to the vibrating membrane of

the instrument. Electrifying the erhu allows Jack to expand the timbral possibilities

of his instrument and mimic the rich palette of rock guitar tone colors. Recently, he

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[36] Interestingly, the application of virtuosity as a means to popularize the *erhu* resonates with the mid-20th-century notions of Chinese *erhu* compositions similar to "Horse Race" (Stock 1992, 70).

bought an amplifier that he saw a country fiddle player using in Nashville. The
complex built-in equalizer allows the amplifier to project from the *erhu* the
desirable "beefy sounds" in low and mid-ranged frequencies. In performance and
on recordings, the *erhu* sound is always mixed in the foreground, taking up the
space conventionally reserved for the lead vocal or instrumental track. Commenting
on the technique of adding the reverb effect on recordings, Jack insists on the
importance of adding only a small amount of reverb so as to not drown out the
original source of the erhu sound. With this, he intends for the subtle reverb effect to
bring out the "presence" of his instrument. He said, "For me, I want more presence.
not really airy [sound]. Like in Chthonic, [with] the erhu they put a shit load of
reverb…[I] feel like [it's] background music for them. But the erhu I want is an in-
your-face kinda thing, since it replaces the vocals" (Hsu 2010). Jack's words such as
"beefy" and "in-your-face" connote a degree of assertion or even aggression,
engendering a masculine expressive mode. The masculinizing patterns in Jack's
erhu-rock style contrast with the feminized "airy" quality or, as discussed in the
previous section, the soft and exotified associations of the *erhu* in Chthonic's music.

     Jack's erhu-rock modifications, however masculinized, are perhaps most
conspicuous in the position of his instrument during performances. Conventionally,
the *erhu* is played on the performer's lap in the seated position. Alternatively, Jack
clips the fragile wooden fiddle onto his waist while he wields his bow, sometimes
with highly-controlled brute forces, in an upright style similar [Figure 3.3] to Jack's
favorite rock guitar virtuosos such as Slash, former lead guitarist of Guns N' Roses.
The comparison with Slash is notable from a gender perspective. Slash slings his

guitar low so that it sits in front of his groin area. The guitar's proximity to his

genitalia is coupled with the fast shredding movement in the high register on the

fingerboard of the guitar. This combination engenders signifiers of "cock rock,"

highlighting masculine sexual prowess represented in phallic displays on the guitar

(Tringali 2005).

The sexualization of the erhu-rock performance is notable among The Hsu-

nami's friends and fans. At The Hsu-nami's more recent show at Arlene's Grocery in

lower-eastside Manhattan close to the Williamsburg Bridge, a young (white) man in

his twenties, who appeared to be friends with the band, yelled, "I want your Pimp-

Stick" referring the *erhu*, right after the band ended their set. The stick-like shape of

the instrument and its erected performance position bring the phallic symbolism

into relief. The reference to pimping implies a control over female sexuality. In that

light, Jack's wielding of his Pimp-Stick can realize the "rock and roll" dream of

playing music while "getting girls." Not only that, his Pimp-stick would make space

for him to fit comfortably in the mostly white, male-dominated, heterosexual norms

within rock music culture (Coates 1997; Nguyen 2001). Aligning with the gender

and sexual norms in rock music, perhaps, enables Jack to achieve his goal of creating

a universal appeal for his instrument and its associated ethnic meanings.

Figure 3.3: Jack Hsu, Taiwanese Welcome Party, Don Hill's Club, New York City, September 26, 2008. Photograph by author.

The Hsu-nami: Deploying Spirituality, Deflecting Conflicts

Seeing The Hsu-nami's bassist Derrill, a tall young man with a neatly trimmed blonde goatee and a friendly smile, one of the Taiwanese audience members said, "I love that he's wearing an 'I love Taiwan" T-shirt. This, to me, means friendship." Jack told me that Derrill wore the shirt only because he knew that the event had "something" to do with Taiwan. He certainly had no idea what kind of political assumption might be taken from it.

With a Taiwanese American *erhu* player fronting an all-white-American band, to many people in the Taiwanese American community, The Hsu-nami's ethnic makeup speaks to the imagined union between Taiwan and the United States. According to Jack, at this show, some of the Taiwanese members of the audience commented on a Tibetan reference in the song title "Entering the Mandala" (The Hsu-nami 2008b). They thought that the band had used the Tibetan allusion as a gesture of resistance against China.[37] This, however, contradicts the band's intention. I asked Jack about the reference to Tibetan Buddhism. He explained that the title alludes to "Mandala," a graphical image that represents the path to enlightenment or the "sacred space" in the Tibetan practice of Vajrayana Buddhism. The band leverages this allusion to depict the "transcendence-like" musical structure of the song. He admitted that the song title sounds "cool" and has nothing to do with the issue of Tibetan freedom.

Tibetan Buddhism occupies a familiar space as a symbol of freedom struggles within the contemporary popular cultural terrain of the United States. The cultural linkage between Tibetan culture and popular music (but with a strong focus on rock music) was largely institutionalized by the music festival series known as the Tibetan Freedom Concert with its first installment in San Francisco in 1996. This rock festival series utilized the celebrity of popular musicians and bands to raise awareness about the Tibetan plight, and to generate funds for organizations working toward the cause of Tibetan freedom. This musico-political movement

[37] Pro-independence Taiwanese individuals would consider Tibet as an ally because they feel empathetic to Tibet's oppression by the Chinese government. A deeper explanation of this political dynamic appears at the end of this section.

grew throughout the late 1990s and lasted into the early 2000s. With the Tibetan

Freedom Concert now in hindsight, The Hsu-nami's discursive affiliation with Tibet

radiates beyond the cause of Tibetan independence, stripping it of its specific

political context related to the violent Chinese suppression of Tibet. Talking to Jack,

I get the sense that Jack is not only hyperaware of the political ramifications of the

Tibetan signifier; and has purposely translated it into a more universal symbol of

peace to fit the band's overall interest in reconciling difference, whether ethnically

or religiously defined.

The Hsu-nami's allusion to Buddhism continues into their second album

(2009b), for which the band named the title track and then the album after another

Buddhist reference: "The Four Noble Truths." Jack explains the story behind this

name:

> In the beginning, the song was called "War." Brent wrote his guitar parts and
> the band did their thing. He wrote it about the Iraq war or whatnot. And
> after adding the *erhu* part, it sounds like a Chinese epic war. We weren't
> liking the title "War," so we had several ideas. I came up with the idea [of]
> naming the song "228" to just make things controversial/memorial... We
> were going to keep that name, but honestly I don't really know that much
> about the history and if it would offend people too much or not. So we
> decided not use that title for the song. "The Four Noble Truths" is a follow-up
> from the title "Entering of the Mandala." It's very religious and you have to
> think about what it means. "The Four Noble Truths" are paths to reach
> enlightenment and mandala is also graph of outer suffering to
> enlightenment" (Hsu 2009).

The band steered away from politically sensitive topics such as the Iraq War and the

228 Incident, also known as the 228 Massacre, a grassroots-inspired riot against the

government in Taiwan that began on February 27, 1947. The name 228 refers to

the date, February 28 or 2-28, on which the Chinese Nationalist (KMT) government

violently suppressed the uprising yielding a death toll of over ten thousand individuals. The 228 Incident marks the beginning of the White Terror era in Taiwan during which thousands of Taiwanese (non-Mandarin) people were imprisoned and killed.

Jack's self-conscious skirting around political controversy in the United States and Taiwan points to The Hsu-nami's general ambivalence regarding politics, domestic and international. Emphasizing sameness over difference, the band resolves their dilemma by deflecting conflict-ridden rhetoric and resorting to a kind of universalist liberalism based in personal spirituality. This universalist interpretation of Buddhism, in fact, resonates with a published note by The Hsu-nami on their official Facebook page (2009a). According to this note, the band's understanding of Buddhism is an individualistic one that stems from the personal practice of meditation. Those engaged in spiritual practices strive for and ultimately serves personal enlightenment. The Hsu-nami's process of naming their album and song titles is oriented toward reconciliation. This process reflects political ambivalence. This conception of Buddhism, however ostensibly "Asian" or "Chinese" in its roots, is a universalizing agent that trumps political and ethnic differences. It steers the band clear of the responsibility of taking sides in politically charged discourses regarding Taiwanese independence or Tibetan independence. The Hsu-nami's focus on a personal attainment of enlightenment allows the band to shift away from issues concerning collective freedom, the original cause of Tibetan freedom, and toward individual freedom, the trope of liberalism familiar in U.S. public discourses. This move enables the band to divert the polarizing tendencies

tied to contemporary transnational politics between China, the United States, Taiwan, and Tibet.

By contrast, Chthonic uses Tibetan imagery toward their agenda of taking an outspoken political stance through music. Chthonic's album *9th Empyrean* (2000) concludes with a song that depicts the final battle scene, where Taiwanese spirits borrow from the forces of Tibetan gods to defeat Chinese gods. The fictional forces that combine the power of the Tibetan gods with the Taiwanese spirits speaks, almost literally, to the contemporary cross-strait politics between China and Taiwan on the issue of Tibetan independence. Many pro-independence Taiwanese are sympathetic to the cause of Tibetan independence because they identify with the Tibetan' experiences of Chinese oppression. Chthonic's political stance is evidenced by their participation in and affiliation with the Tibetan Freedom Concerts in Taipei in 2003 and 2008. Freddy Lim of Chthonic was a major organizer of these events.

At the CATUN event, the pro-independence, anti-UN rally-goers were not interested in drawing the distinction between the political position (or lack thereof) of The Hsu-nami versus that of Chthonic. CATUN's intended articulation of a politicized "Taiwanese" identity has had ripple effect on shaping the public reception of The Hsu-nami. Media coverage of the event exposed The Hsu-nami to the overseas Taiwanese community who readily associated the band with pro-Taiwanese independence politics.

A Taiwanese American Ambivalence to Transnational Geopolitics

On Twitter, Jack sends out a message to his followers, "Grandmas love The Hsu-nami!" Out of curiosity, I tweet him back to ask him for the full story. In a short email, he tells me about his interaction with an endearing elderly Taiwanese woman after their performance at the Passport to Taiwan Festival.

Jack says, after a performance, a grandmother-aged woman clung to him. With a great big smile, she seemed really proud of him. She said in Taiwanese, "It's great that you're Taiwanese." Not knowing what she said exactly, Jack replied, "yea."

Then the elderly woman carried on the conversation in Taiwanese. When she realized that Jack couldn't understand her, she asked, "Are you from China?" She couldn't fathom how Jack could be from Taiwan but not understand Taiwanese.

As the only Taiwanese American member in the group, Jack bears the burden of explicating the political position of his band. Jack's encounter with the elderly woman, narrated in italics above, refers to the fraught distinction of being "from Taiwan or China." This interaction illustrates a strong sense of ethnic nationalism, on the part of the grandmother-aged woman, that calls for a partisan allegiance to one nation-state based on one's ethnicity. According to this view, one could only be either from Taiwan or China. No individuals could possibly indentify with both countries and cultures, not to mention the possibility of an added identification with a third culture. Imposed upon Jack, the ethnic nationalism that fuels the Cross-Strait politics between China and Taiwan poses a dissonance with Jack's transnational upbringing and multiethnic training in music. Jack moved to New Jersey from Taiwan with his parents at age twelve. To ensure that he not "forget his roots," for a

summer when he was fourteen, Jack's parents sent him to Nanjing, China, the old

home of his grandfather. He was sent explicitly to study the *erhu*. At the time, Jack

had already mastered western classical violin. He thought he could easily pick up

the *erhu* because it resembles the violin. Then in college back in the United States,

he dabbled in rock guitar. He eventually developed his distinct musical identity by

playing *erhu* in a rock band that he started with his musician friends at Ramapo

College in New Jersey.

In an online chat with me over the December 2008 holiday, Jack revealed his

frustration with the task of defining the ethnic orientation of his band.

TaiwaneseAmerican.org, a blog with a mission to "To connect, inform and promote

the people, events and organizations that serve the 2nd generation Taiwanese

American community," had approached Jack for an interview via email. Knowing

the blog's affiliation with many pro-Taiwan independence organizations, Jack

confided to me that he was stumped by some of the questions asked in the interview

email. Seeing this interview as a discursive space to represent and promote his

band to the Taiwanese American community, Jack floundered at conjuring ways to

capture his personal sense of "ethnic" belonging, revolving around terms such as

Taiwanese, Chinese, and Asian, combined with his long-time permanent residence in

the U.S. and his band's "American" personnel. He wanted to avoid the risk of

alienating individuals with opposing political views. Jack said, "if I say, 'Chinese,'

Taiwanese people would be mad since usually Taiwanese don't see themselves as

Chinese" (Hsu 2008). Jack linked his feelings of entrapment to the news story about

Jay Chou, an R&B singer-songwriter based in Taiwan currently enjoying a super-

celebrity across Asia. According to Jack and others, Chou faced criticisms and

accusations of being disloyal to Taiwan after proclaiming that "We are all Chinese

people" at a concert in China.

Jack worried about the prospect of becoming entangled in the inflammatory

partisan politics across the Taiwan Strait, which he knows very little about. Jack has

spent most of his life in the U.S. The dialog below illustrates Jack's predicament of

ethnic ambivalence. My own handle name is "imtenis" and Jack's screen name is "正

杰 jacki," the combination of his name in Chinese and English.

```
imtenis says:
        It's not like you're playing into the either-green-or-blue political system
        in Taiwan – am I right to say that, or no?
正杰 jacki says:
        No, I don't know that much about it.
imtenis says:
        I see.  I think there are a lot of us who are in a similar situation
正杰 jacki says:
        Yea, it's just the Taiwan pride I've got.
imtenis says:
        But still feeling kind of out of touch?
正杰 jacki says:
         Yup.
imtenis says:
        And you wish that your "Taiwan pride" doesn't have to feed into the
        politics between US, China and Taiwan, right?
正杰 jacki says:
        Yea, too complicated.
```

A reflective moment for both Jack and me: this conversation touched on not

only political issues such as the Taiwan-U.S. relations and the Cross-Strait ethnic

conflicts. Even deeper perhaps, we discovered that we share a conundrum as

individuals of Taiwanese descent, or more precisely, as 1.5-generation Taiwanese

Americans, with respect to these issues. This predicament has led to our feeling of

entrapment between now politicized ethno-nationally defined terms such as

"Taiwanese", "Chinese," and "American." Feeling like a big sister, I guided the

discussion of our shared ambivalence; I became a kind of publicity coach.

imtenis says:
> What I'm sensing is that you're embracing different parts of your Taiwanese heritage and some of that has to do with its Chinese culture: the culture that both Taiwanese and mainland people share. It's ok, I think, because you're not actually in Taiwan now. You're here in the US and the distinction between Taiwan and China is up to you to define as an individual. You don't have to buy into the green–blue party system if you don't want to.

正杰 jacki says:
> Interesting. We're working on our next album and thinking of the concept for it at the moment. And it can be simply the love of two cultures coming together.

imtenis says:
> Oh yea? Nice. I like the positive language. The world needs more of that.

正杰 jacki says:
> Yea, definitely.

imtenis says:
> Taiwaneseamerican.org is obviously a political org, but you don't have to be as political as they are. And you can still get your points and music across, I think.

正杰 jacki says:
> I see. Yea, we're just thinking of a way to publicize the band.

imtenis says:
> They're more interested in the conflict between Taiwan and China, but it seems like to me that you're not quite as into that...more into the love and peace between countries, especially Taiwan and US.

正杰 jacki says:
> We don't really have to support anything.

imtenis says:
> Right, of course. I think you can simply say that your music is about two cultures coming together.

正杰 jacki says:
> Yea, it's better that way so at least our music means something.

imtenis says:
> This is safe, in terms of politics. Two cultures coming together – with love and peace.

正杰 jacki says:
> Umm, so good. Yea that's it.

In this chat session, Jack expressed The Hsu-nami's mission as a cultural

collaboration, or in his own words, "the love of two cultures coming together." By

not naming the "two cultures," Jack deploys this ambiguity in order to avoid

potential inter-cultural or ethnic conflicts. In this instance, ethnic ambiguity

facilitates The Hsu-nami's achieving of its peace-ful and conflict-free image. The

ambiguity of this intra-cultural collaboration also resonates with the band's self-

defined genre using the term "erhu-rock", or at other times "erhu fusion rock." On

The Hsu-nami's official website, the English version of the band biography

articulates this symbolic cultural union as "East meets West...the combination of an

Asian cultural icon with the tenacity of American modern rock" (2008a). This text

suggests the band has branded itself with a luminal bi-cultural, hyphenated identity.

Hyphenation signifies a sense of belonging to two social groups, simultaneously,

between East and West, between Asian and American. At the same time, the

identification with one group does not supersede that with the other group. The co-

existence of two cultures implies a peaceful, loving union as imagined by Jack and

his music-making cohorts. Intriguingly, the Chinese version[38] of the band biography

expresses the fusion aesthetic in more specific terms as a "*cultural* exchange

between Taiwan and the United States" (my emphasis). To the Chinese readers, The

Hsu-nami identifies specifically with both Taiwan and the U.S., but only through

culture. The emphasis on "culture" implicitly wards off any potential misreadings

that may be related to the ethnic politics between Taiwan and China.

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[38] In my interview with Jack, I found out that the Chinese biography was supposedly a Chinese translation from the English biography done by a friend. This text is written in traditional Chinese, rather than Simplified Chinese. This is probably an indication of the translator's Taiwanese national origin, since people who live or were educated in Taiwan all use Traditional Chinese. Simplified Chinese is used in Mainland China. This may affect the Chinese-speaking audience's perception of their Taiwanese affiliations.

Media Pressures Surrounding the Olympic Fame

Members of the Taiwanese American community in the New York

metropolitan area have expressed displeasure with The Hsu-nami's seemingly

ambiguous ethnic identification. The Hsu-nami's musical presence at the 2008

Olympics in Beijing, China augmented this tension. Impressed by The Hsu-nami's

performance footage aired on AZN Television,[39] Jason Gilfillan, producer at NBA

Entertainment who later became the music coordinator of the 2008 Olympics, asked

the band for the permission to use its music at the Olympics. Gilfillan eventually

programmed The Hsu-nami's track "Rising of the Sun" at the Olympic games in

Beijing to represent the Chinese Men's Basketball Team. Excited to share this news,

Jack emailed his friends, family, fans, and various organizations and media outlets

about The Hsu-nami's airplay at the Olympics. To his surprise, Jack learned that the

so-called "Taiwanese American community" had used the Olympics as an occasion

to protest against the Chinese threat upon Taiwan and Tibet. This particular tension

dates back to 1971 when Taiwan's withdrawal from the U.N. led to the exclusion of

Taiwan from the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.). Later a Taiwanese

representative from the IOC rallied for the inclusion of Taiwan and regained their

access to Olympic participation with the condition of using the name "Chinese

Taipei." The imposed designation of "Chinese Taipei" has instigated a Taiwanese

nationalistic backlash since then (Kao 2007). And the anti-China Taiwanese

American contingent, for the same reason, refused to recognize and publicize The

Hsu-nami's accomplishment at the Olympics.

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[39] This footage features The Hsu-nami's live set in Union Square Park at the Asian/Pacific American Heritage Festival organized by CAPA (Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans) in May 2007.

The non-Taiwanese, mainstream press approached The Hsu-nami's airplay at the Olympics with a different spin. Local news outlets such as NY1 and NJ.com immediately snagged The Hsu-nami triumph and couched it as a "Jersey band" news story. The Associated Press also picked up the story and distributed it regionally and nationally through NBC Sports, USA Today, and others. These stories centered their narrative on Jack's experiences and ethnicity, while neglecting the controversy and protest against the IOC from the perspective of Taiwanese nationalists. Columnist Jim Beckerman of NorthJersey.com wrote, "No doubt Fort Lee's Jack Hsu, originally from Taiwan, will be cheering on his countrymen in the basketball competition at the 2008 Summer Olympics this month (2008).[40] This statement overlooks the ethnic, national, and political distinction between Taiwan and China. It also translates Jack's Taiwanese national origin into an allegiance to China as his supposed "home country," without considering that he is in fact a U.S. citizen.

Similarly, NJ.com calls Jack "a native of Taiwan who plays a traditional two-stringed Chinese instrument called an *erhu*" (McHugh 2008). Labeling Jack as "a native of Taiwan" precludes Jack's long-term residence in New Jersey and U.S. citizenship. Juxtaposing Jack's Taiwanese national origin with the *erhu's* Chinese roots, while using ethnic descriptors such as "native" and "traditional", over-emphasizes the ethnic otherness of both Jack and his instrument. From a majoritarian perspective, the rhetorical effect produced by this presumably white American subjectivity, reduces Jack's multi-faceted Taiwanese-American identification into a flattened image of an alien resident. In both news articles, Jack's

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[40] *NorthJersey.com* is the online edition of the local newspaper in Bergen County *The Record*.

over-generalized ethnicity makes him foreign, or generically "not American." This

feeds into the stereotype of the Perpetual Foreigner as experienced by many Asian

minorities living in the U.S.

In the midst of the celebratory spirit and press confusion around the Olympic

games, I posted my thoughts – both congratulatory (of the band) and critical (of the

press) – on my blog on Yellowbuzz.org. In this blog post, I contextualized my

critique with a brief historical account of Taiwan-China relations, with the intention

to clarify the national distinction and political dispute between the two countries.

On the band website, The Hsu-nami publicly responded to Beckerman's article and

my blog post by asserting a disclaimer that Jack is from "Taiwan (Chinese Taipei –

Olympic name)." This note was intended to rectify Beckman's assumption, "It's

incorrect to call the Chinese basketball team his 'countrymen'." The inclusion of the

name "Chinese Taipei" in the disclaimer suggests that the band acknowledges the

Chinese pressure on Taiwan, without committing to either side of the Cross-Strait

politics. Similarly, in the interview by *MuchMusic*, a Canadian music network, Jack is

quoted as saying: "The struggles suffered by the Taiwanese people are, of course,

terrible, but that's only if you truly believe any of those conflicts occurred in the first

place. The past is past. I look forward and have no problem with China especially

when they want one of our songs!"[41]

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[41] The quotation can no longer be found on the *MuchMusic* website. It is, however, cited by *Wikipedia*.
Incidentally, my blog is cited by Wikipedia in The Hsu-nami's Wikipedia entry. Read about The Hsu-nami
on *Wikipedia*, "The Hsu-nami", *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,
http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Hsu-nami&oldid=415312793 (accessed on February 23,
2011).

The over-generalization of Jack and his band's ethnic affiliations happens, unfortunately, as frequently in independent media as in mainstream press. A blogger from *Lucid Culture*, a New-York-based music and politics e-zine, writes in a concert review, "The Hsu-nami are like Chinese hot sauce – no matter how intense it gets, you still keep wanting more and more" (2009). The association of the sound of The Hsu-nami with "Chinese hot sauce" can be linked to the cultural cliché of the "exotic" Chinese and other Asian food culture in the U.S. (Moon 2005: 47-8; Lee 1999: 38-9). Jack and The Hsu-nami's efforts toward explicating Jack's national origin have not always successfully avoided the pitfall of discursive exoticization from press commentators, particularly from rock journalists. In the same review, the blogger connects The Hsu-nami's performance to another all-too-familiar symbol of Chinese culture: Chinese opera. "The next song segued from a predictably amusing, sarcastically metalized version of the Godfather Theme, Hsu mocking the melody against stately piano, then morphing into what sounded like Iron Maiden playing a dramatic Chinese opera theme lit up by a twin solo by the two guitarists." According to this blogger, Jack's *erhu* playing conjured the peculiar image of "Iron Maiden playing a dramatic Chinese opera theme." Iron Maiden, representing the New Wave British Heavy Metal movement, is an English heavy metal group of international acclaim whose career spanned the last three decades of the 20th century. The sound and sight of Chinese opera has had a long history of associated as an object of fantasy and aversion in American Chinatown. Mainstream white American press expressed their displeasure and distaste for the tradition (Moon 2005: 71). Other sources have indicated it as part of the exotic attraction of

Chinatown (Yang 2001: 343-5). The combination of a now-classic heavy metal

iconicity and the exoticized Chinese opera, imagined by an American majority, is

unusual, and would be almost contradictory in most circumstances. But in the case

of The Hsu-nami, this image represents a convincing coalescing of sounds of distinct

ethnic affiliations. This comment seems to put forward that the Anglo-American

rock music and press has accepted The Hsu-nami's characteristic ethnic otherness.

If one of the gods from the heavy metal pantheon could embody the exotic sound of

the "Far East," then it must be fine to do so without being ostracized from the canon.

However complimentary, this comparison is only comprehensible in reference to

the Orientalist reference of Asian exoticism.[42]

Leveraging a Transnational Musical Diplomacy

How does Jack maneuver himself out of the politicized ethnic binary between

China and Taiwan? How has Jack learned to attain his identity as a musician while

retaining the control of and leveraging his self-representation as an ethnic minority

vis a vis the mainstream public? I argue that Jack and his band-mates have, more

recently, contextualized their musical project under the banner of cultural

diplomacy, extending from the band's former proclamation of peace-ful cultural

exchange or collaboration as discussed earlier. In face the splintering and

pigeonholing politics, Jack Hsu has come to embrace his transnational, intra-ethnic

limbo associated with his erhu fusion rock project. Not only that, in attempt to

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[42] In a similar vein, Andrew Watson, a representative of major label Universal Records, made a comment about The Hsu-nami after seeing their performance. "If Charle Danials [*sic*] was adopted by Chinese parents and jamed [*sic*] with King Crimson that is Hsu-nami." This quote was found on The Hsu-nami's Facebook group page (2009a) and Twitter (2009b).

sidestep political positioning, he has found himself slipping into the role of cultural

diplomat to facilitate the communication and understanding of differences, however

infused by ethnic or racial ideologies.

Led by Jack's vision, The Hsu-nami's mission of diplomacy has manifested

itself in its more recent musical endeavors. On their second album (The Hsu-nami,

2009), the song "Passport to Taiwan" demonstrates the band's culturally-focused

diplomatic approach to musical syncretism. In this song, The Hsu-nami adapted the

melodies of three Taiwanese folk and early popular songs and arranged them into

an erhu-rock medley. Quite literally, the arrangement of the medley indexes Jack's

role as a cultural ambassador in the context of his band. These songs all follow the

same pattern: Jack ushers in these distinctively "Taiwanese"[43] melodies while lead

guitarist Brent joins to support. Brent develops the melodic material and then co-

presents it with Jack in a digestible progressive-rock-driven translation.

During the first song of the three-song medley, "Dark Sky" (天黑黑), with

striking lyricism, Jack introduces the minor pentatonic melody of the verse section

on his *erhu* over power chords on the guitar. In the chorus section, guitarist Brent

joins Jack's *erhu* doubling the melody. At the end of the second *erhu*-and-guitar joint

chorus, Brent's distorted feedback guitar sneaks in to harmonize the last three notes

of the section, descending from an octave above. Now occupying the sonic center-

stage, Brent plays a guitar solo that departs melodically from the original pentatonic

melody. Brent takes the original tune's tonal center away from the pentatonic

minor sound around A and G to hover around E and C. After playing a cluster of

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[43] These tunes are distinctively marked as "Taiwanese" because of the original lyrics are sung in the Taiwanese dialect.

notes based on the C-major scale and then hitting a high C, Brent's solo descends

and lands on an A, bringing back the chorus melody in the original A pentatonic

minor mode. Jack and Brent repeat the *erhu*-and-guitar union in the last chorus to

end the first song in the medley [Audio Example 3.2]. On stage, Jack and Brent,

usually wearing a "Say Yes to Taiwan" T-shirt, side by side while playing the melody

together [Figure 3.4]. Their musical and kinesthetic performance indicate an

unequivocal union across the cultural and national rift between Taiwan and the

United States, between Asia and America.

Figure 3.4: Jack Hsu and Brent Bergholm, Taiwanese Welcome Party, Don Hill's Club, New York City, September 26, 2008. Photograph by author.

The Hsu-nami named the song after the annual cultural festival organized by

the Taiwanese American Association of New York (TAA-NY). Jack and his band-

mate Brent have expressed their ultimate "dream" of touring Taiwan. Positioning

the song as a cultural visa, they hope that this song will help them gain an entry into

Taiwan.[44] According to Jack, covering Taiwanese songs served to "thank the festival.

[I] chose the most famous ones that I know when I was little" (Hsu 2009). The

Passport to Taiwan festival emerged in 2002 after the United States Congress

designated the second week of May as "Taiwanese American Heritage Week to

recognize the contributions of Taiwanese Americans." Spearheading the initiative to

"introduce Taiwan and Taiwanese Americans," Passport to Taiwan has since

become the largest, most iconic outdoor Taiwanese event in the country. The Hsu-

nami has performed at Passport to Taiwan every year since 2006. Over the years,

The Hsu-nami has claimed the iconic role of headlining at the festival.

The metaphor of diplomacy concretized when the organizers, joined by the

Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York (a unit of the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs of Taiwan), appointed Jack as the event programmer for Passport to Taiwan

2010. Jack took the position with the intentions to make the festival less

"traditional," taking claims as to create a "hip" Taiwanese America. Over various

chat sessions, Jack consulted me for recommendations for bands with a Taiwanese

American contingent. After serious considerations, Jack created a music program

featuring five rock-oriented groups to fit the "Taiwanese-American Bands Rock

Passport to Taiwan 2010" bill. The promotion materials for this event reflect Jack's

vision for a hip, cool, and young Taiwanese America. The event flyer show images of

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[44] The "Passport to Taiwan" metaphor took another turn recently. The attempt to target the popular music market in Mainland China made the band reconsider its specific affiliations to Taiwan. After consulting the Vice President of Universal Music Groups, Jack and his band-mates decided to take out the word "Taiwan" in the title.

loud speakers and denim texture image as background to appeal to the young

Taiwanese Americans [Figure 3.5].

Figure 3.5: Passport to Taiwan 2010 Flyer, designed by Dana Goldburg. Courtesy of Artist.

In organizing the festival, Jack revealed to me the difficulties of managing the pro-independence politicking by some members of the organizing committee. In particular, he had to juggle the semantic baggage of one of the band names: Renminbi. Also known as the "Chinese Yuan," "Renminbi" is the currency used in Mainland China. Feeling the pressure to prove the Taiwanese affiliation of the band, Jack asked me to verify the ethnic background of Lisa Liu, one of two core members of the group. Fortunately, the band decided to change its name to Magnetic Island during the course of the event planning. Jack divulged that he felt relieved by this name change toward the "less political" end of the spectrum. Along with his efforts to subvert the traditions at past events, Jack enlisted DJ Hatfield, an Anglo-American anthropologist fluent in Mandarin and Taiwanese, as the emcee of the event.

Starting in late 2009, Jack has embarked on a new journey as the cultural liaison between various sectors of the Taiwanese and Chinese communities. He does so by establishing social connections with musicians, artists, and organizers of Taiwanese, Chinese, or other Asian American contingents in the New York metropolitan area. Since the band's appearance at the CATUN performance, The Hsu-nami has shared a stage with a number of touring Taiwanese musicians such as the hip-hip group Kou Chou Ching and piano-indie rock band Tizzy Bac. In his personal creative life, Jack has collaborated with a number of Taiwanese musicians such as the hip-hop *DJ* Jay Szu (*DJ* 小四) who lives in Queens.

With the curatorial power that he earned, Jack has been busily working toward forging a strong presence for a non-partisan musical Taiwanese America. Deploying the metaphor of diplomacy, Jack and his band-mates leverage their

creative agency while generating a musical output that resonates with their ever-shifting experiences, however shaped by the U.S. racial consciousness, and by the transnational relations and politics between China and Taiwan. And conveniently, diplomacy feeds visibility, a key interest of most independent musicians.

In conclusion, The Hsu-nami's dynamic shifting of ethno-national affiliations illustrate the situational nature of ethnicity (Maira 2002, 92). The band's contextual ethnic expressivity calls essentialist notions into question. It challenges ethnic fixity and boundaries associated with nationhood. The Hsu-nami is now finding comfort in the midst of the transpacific ethnic typhoon that the group has been thrown into. In this transnational limbo, the band elicits a strategic self-preserving politic, an aesthetic of fusion, and articulates an ethos of peace-oriented diplomacy.

Chapter 4: The Kominas's Punk Punjab and Digital Diaspora:
Reclaiming a Socio-musical Transnation

In the midst of my field research, I stumble upon a description of The Kominas in the weekly email sent by the Asia Pacific Forum, a "progressive pan-Asian radio show" broadcast on FM radio in New York City and live on the Internet. Intrigued, I immediately search for and locate the audio file of the radio show segment containing a feature story on The Kominas. I download and then play back to listen to the MP3 file on my laptop. The file begins with a recording of the band's recent live show at Goodnight Blue Monday in Bushwick, Brooklyn, followed by the show host's introduction and phone interview with The Kominas's bassist and lead singer Basim. In 13 minutes and 5 megabytes, I learn about Basim's involvement in the origin and development of the taqwacore movement, mainstream and Muslim reception of The Kominas, the band's anti-conservative ethos and blasphemy-ridden music, and Basim's efforts to ignite a punk music scene in Pakistan. The APF radio segment ends with the band's studio recording of "Par Desi." Listening to the song, I'm mesmerized by the band's creative approach to enmesh a unique bhangra-inspired guitar riff and a familiar Bostonian ska rhythm. The radio file ends before the song is over. I'm left with the desire of wanting to hear the rest of the song about what it feels like to be stomped by boots at a chaotic punk show...

I think to myself: this band is really going to transform my project. The Kominas would offer a South Asian American and Muslim perspective invisible until now. I frantically start Google-searching for information and media about and by the

band. I land on the band's Myspace page. I send out a media blast on Twitter,

Facebook, and various social networking sites, stating my interest in connecting to the

band. Within a day, Imran, otherwise known as Rockistani, who is living in Chicago at

the moment, sends me a direct message on Twitter explaining that he is the drummer

for The Kominas. In no time, with the help of digital social media, I set up a meeting

with the band at a diner near South Station in Boston. We quickly become friends.

The process through which I came to know The Kominas is noteworthy. It
illustrates how the world shared by The Kominas, me, and many other active
members of the Muslim-affiliated, punk-inflected taqwacore[45] scene, is embedded in
a global network built by digital social media. In chapter two, I discussed how the
band has redefined tokenistic multiculturalism within the United States while
forging various bonds with other ethnic and religious minorities. In this chapter, I
will focus on how the band has turned outward and eastward, reconstituting the
world's geography to make its own postcolonial punk rock transnation.

Since 2007, The Kominas has been vigorously creating a translocal social
terrain via face-to-face interactions through touring and online social networking.
Members of the band have crossed the borders of more than three nation-states
including Pakistan, United Kingdom, Canada, U.S., leaving their home in
northeastern United States to perform in three continents of the world, and
establish friend networks across North America, Europe, the Middle East, South and
Southeast Asia. I argue that the Kominas's transnational aesthetics and worldview
are related to, if not a consequence of, the (South) Asian American sense of lack of

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[45] The taqwacore concept was first introduced in chapter two, on p. 62.

national belonging and social comfort (Maira 2009). After the events on September 11th, 2001, this collective state of melancholia has been brought into relief as a response to Islamphobia and the War on Terror. As discussed in chapter two, the members of The Kominas, have experienced alienation, similar to many individuals of South Asian, Muslim, and Arabic heritage living the U.S. In their everyday lives, they juggle the consequences of the neo-Orientalist and "civilizational" (Polumbo-Liu 2001) discourses that partition the world into two opposing halves, namely, Muslim and Western. The band members have suggested that they never feel quite "at home" when they're home. They have written songs with titles such as "Sharia Law in the USA" to question the racializing surveillance upon individuals assumed to be of Muslim descent, especially after the events of September 11. The song "Suicide Bomb the Gap" subverts the "Terror"-infused imagery of South Asian and Muslim masculinity, as rampantly portrayed and circulated in mainstream news media. This chapter, however, does not elaborate on these overt instances of resistance. Instead, it focuses on how the members of the band have asserted themselves in reclaiming their own spaces within the world, in light of post-9/11 geopolitics.

Looking at The Kominas's music and their interactions over social media, this chapter seeks to articulate and understand the band's self-made geography. The band deploys the punk sound and do-it-yourself social-networking to re-territorialize and re-embed themselves into a world partitioned by ideology, politics, and migration. In doing so, The Kominas decenters punk and rock music as dominated by Anglo-America, taking back its home in a place away from home.

Theoretically, this chapter builds on Josh Kun's conception of "audiotopia" as "small, momentary, lived utopias built, imagined, and sustained through sound, noise, and music." Audiotopia is a concept that considers music in spatial terms, specifically "the spaces that the music itself contains, the spaces that music fills up, the spaces that music helps us to imagine as listeners occupying our own real and imaginary spaces" (2005: 21). While Kun's formulation focuses on spatial meanings embedded in recorded sound, I extend it to consider musical instances in a variety of social spaces, live and recorded, embodied and virtual, physical and imagined, all occupied by The Kominas's wildly dynamic geography. First, through a series of close song readings, I will illustrate how the band makes a unique set of punk-inspired sounds infused by bhangra and other musical forms from South Asia, thus evoking a musical "punk Punjab." Secondly, I will discuss the musicians' D.I.Y. organizing, i.e. forming tours and a record label, while creating a "brown" social hub of musicians and music promoters across the U.S. east coast and the Atlantic Ocean. The third section will focus on the band's engagement with digital social media, specifically on the social networking site Myspace, as a means to reach a global network of listeners and supporters.

This chapter will be followed by a subchapter that discusses the use of new and experimental ethnographic tools inspired by the field of digital humanities. My formulation of a digital ethnography grew out of my close interactions with The Kominas's social network on the Internet. This subchapter will broadly situate my digital methods within the ethnographic literature on media and technology. It will

end with an ethnographic reflection on critical race theory, cyberpunk literature, postnationality, and postcolonialism in a digital social context.

Transnational Audiotopia: Creating A Punk Punjab

Recombining sounds from the Boston ska and punk scene, from classic British punk rock, from 1970s Bollywood movies, and from Punjabi pop music from their parents' dusty tape collections, The Kominas evokes a radically transnational sonic landscape. The members of the band have embedded myriad elements from the rich and diverse soundscape, linked to their South Asian heritage, into a minimalist punk song structure combined with an unadorned noisy tone. In its early years, the band coined the term "Bollywood punk" to describe its sound. On the first album (2008), the lyrics of track four "Dishoom Bebe" narrate a scene from a 1970s Bollywood classic film *Sholay*. In one of the scenes in the movie, the actor Amitabh Bachnan says "Dishoom," an onomatopoeia evoking the firing of a gun, while he shoots with his finger. Inspired by this filmic moment, The Kominas's song screams a blast of fun and adventurous fraternity. In it, the band takes its listeners through this movie scene, charging forward over a 6/8 meter with hardcore vocals half-spoken-half-sung in unison, interspersing the song with re-enacted dialogue from the movie. Last year in 2010, the band recorded a cover of "Manji Vich Daang"[46] from a film produced in Lollywood, the Pakistani film industry based in Lahore. The

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[46] In a Pakistani paper, Imran remarks that the motivation behind covering "Manji Vich Daang" is to challenge the authority for banning the music by Naseebo Lal, the original singer of the song. He said, "I was interested in the controversy behind her, and how banning someone like Naseebo Lal is an *wefil* thing. The only way as a band to pay tribute to someone like her is to cover one of her songs." For more, read Imtiaz, Huma. 2010b. "Punking Pakistan up." The Express Tribune, November 23. http://www.karachidigest.com/articles/news/punking-pakistan-up/(accessed on December 7, 2010).

Kominas's version of the song retains the original Punjabi lyrics and stripps away

the ornate rhythmic structure in the original version. In its version, The Kominas

translates the parts on the dhol—a large two-headed drum frequently used in

bhangra, a popular music style associated with Punjab, a cultural region that

straddles both present-day Pakistan and India—into bass drum beats. It also

performs on snare drum the rhythm originally played on the tabla, a pair of hand

drums commonly used in Hindustani classical music and Bollywood film music.

Playing chromatic notes in a sixteen-note pattern, the guitar riff evokes the sound of

iktar-picking, a one-string instrument iconic of bhangra music. Omitting the

orchestral strings, synthesizer, sitar, woodwinds, Latin percussion and brass in the

original version, the band's delivery of the song is raw and has a punk minimalist

instrumentation comprised of only a bass, a guitar, drums, and vocals. In addition,

the band made a homebrewed "mash-up" music video of the song, after adding neon

color visual effects to the Youtube-hacked footage of a courtesan dance sequence,

featuring famous India film actress Nargis Dutt.[47] In live shows, The Kominas

sometimes covers another tune "Choli Ke Peeche" from a popular Bollywood film

called *Khalnayak*. The song is known in the U.K. and U.S. as a part of the soundtrack

of the blockbuster hit *Slumdog Millionaire.*[48] Outside the context of the band, the

individuals members have served as cultural taste-makers introducing musical

styles of the South Asian subcontinent to English-speaking audiences locally and

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[47] The Kominas' video: http://il.youtube.com/watch?v=nk0q4Y-5pvo ; source material for the video mashup: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9-5cgYYcJY ; the 'source material' for the basis of comparison in my analysis: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJmRawg7Ft4

[48] Jha, Subhash K. 2008. "A. R. Rahman Uses 'Choli Ke Peeche' Track from Khalnayak in Slumdog Millionaire", Bollywoodhungama.com, November 27.
http://www.bollywoodhungama.com/news/2008/11/27/12244/index.html (accessed September 14, 2010).

internationally. Basim has DJ'ed at local dance clubs in Boston spinning records and has distributed homemade Internet radio podcasts curating old and new popular music from Punjab and from the Punjabi disaporic communities in New York and the United Kingdom.

My reading of The Kominas's transnational musical geography begins with a close examination of the band's performance in Charlottesville, Virginia. This was a show that I organized on the band's national tour in the summer of 2009:

The Kominas's backup singer Nyle dances to excite the audience. Sporting a freshly cut Mohawk with copper-color-bleached strands, Nyle steps away from the microphone onto the dance floor, vigorously kicking his feet apart, skanking to a ska beat. He draws up his left arm while pressing down with his right arm, twisting his body to drummer Imran's quarter-note strikes on the snare drum. Guitarist Shahjehan plays a syncopated riff and then transitions into a steady chromatic 16th-note double-picking. Meanwhile, Nyle's movement grows deeper and lower. He turns his hips back and forth. He swings his arms, almost slamming them. He lets his shoulders bounce up and down, moving to the now subdivided guitar rhythm. During the last section of the song, Nyle grabs the microphone off the stand. He then casts his body into small pit of dancers in the audience, slamming and moshing with the crowd. He screams "la-la-la, la-la-la" in unison with his brother Basim. He then pulls too hard on his mic cable to disconnect his mic. The moshing crowd carries on Nyle's infectious energy into the next song.

Figure 4.1: Nyle Usmani, The Bridge PAI, Charlottesville VA, August 12, 2009

Nyle's side-to-side body rotation and arm-swinging are reminiscent of slam-dancing, common in punk shows, and skanking, the "running-man" move in ska music [Figure 4.1]. His shoulder-bouncing movement indexes a dance movement common in bhangra music. Stylistically, Nyle's dance crosses four regions of the world: Punjab on the South Asian subcontinent; in the Caribbean, Jamaica, the birthplace of ska and reggae; England in Western Europe, known for spawning punk

rock music and second-wave ska music; and the United States in North America, the birthplace of hardcore punk and third-wave ska. Nyle's dance movements articulate a transnational musical map that reflects the band's hybridized approaches to music-making.

This song evokes an ethnic and geographical quandary. Basim's voice shivers as he sings the chorus line, "In Lahore it's raining water, in Boston it rains boots." The subject in the song defines his physical home in Boston, where he experienced an assault by skinhead punks. He sings, "They tried to stomp me out, but they only fueled the flame." The song narrates a history of migration and the emotions of displacement. It continues, "Where do I point to blame, when men scatter like moths? /… how'd I get here, from a land with long monsoons?" Feelings of local alienation fuel nostalgia for Lahore, a home far away from home. This song describes an emotional geography—a spatial containment in Boston (and by extension, the United States) in juxtaposition with a safe refuge in Lahore, Pakistan, in the remote land of the South Asian subcontinent.

In the music, the guitarist plays fast chromatic sixteenth notes, foreshadowing the emergence of a "punk Punjab" by emulating an iktar or a tumbi, a one-string plucked instrument often used in the music of bhangra [Audio Example 4.1]. The song represents a reparative gesture against the racist climate looming over Punk-Skinhead Boston. Here, the studio recording of the song adds nuance to the geographical question concerning ethnic belonging. Marking a closure for the lament in first half the song, Basim delivers the last lyric, "boots crushing my shoulders / where angels chose not to remain." Screaming a Punjabi heritage, The

Kominas uses the bhangra sound to mark an alternative ethnicized space around the white-supremacist punkdom. Casting the racist assault into a musical past, an 8-second analog sample of live bhangra percussion comes into the musical present. This sample quickly transports the listener away from the emotional space of the lament. Extending from the triplet pattern in the percussion sample, the band carries the bhangra beat, transforming it into a collective punk-style chanting of "la-la-la" in the final section of the song. This chant rejoices in the form of a Ramones-like punk choir, roughly in unison with a distorted guitar. This time, the bhangra guitar sounds heavier and angstier than before [Audio Example 4.2].

The title of the song "Par Desi" could illuminate the transnational soundscape created by the music. "Desi" is a term used by individuals of South Asian descent to refer to their heritage and culture.[49] "Par Desi," in Urdu, literally means "of the country," or "from the motherland." As discussed in the previous paragraphs, this song embodies a "bhangra-punk" aesthetic, a term that I use to refer to the band's process of translating the sound of bhangra into a raw, punk-inspired delivery. But why would The Kominas frame its unique bhangra-punk aesthetics within the context of a transnational South Asian identification? How is being South Asian related to being a minority punk rocker longing for a home? The Kominas's bhangra-punk, I argue, is invented out of a South-Asian- and desi-identified ethnic space: imagined somewhere between Punjab, the 1970s punk England, and present-

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[49] The everyday and historical of the term "desi" has been examined in scholarship. For a historical account of the construction the desi, consult Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Minneapolis, M.N.: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. For contemporary and ethnographic narratives on the desi identity, read Sunaina Maira's *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*, Philadelphia, P.A.: Temple University Press, 2002; and Shankar, Shalini. 2008. *Desi Land: Teen Culture, Class, and Success in Silicon Valley*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

day home in the northeastern United States. Bhangra-punk, for The Kominas, is a (musical) home away from its (physical) home.

The Kominas's newer song "Tunnnnnn" provides further insights into the connection of its bhangra-punk aesthetics to the reggae sound and a Rastafarian outlook. "Tunnnnnn" is a remake of "Armagideon Time", a reggae song originally performed and recorded by Jamaican artist Willi Williams in 1978. British punk band The Clash recorded its version and released it as a B-side track on the "London Calling" single in 1979. On another "London Calling" 12" single release (1979) shortly after, The Clash included two dub mixes of the song, with the names "Justice Tonight" and "Kick It Over." The Clash premiered its version of "Armagideon Time" in performance in California in September 1979.

The Kominas's version, entitled "Tunnnnnn" exhibits musical characteristics closer to Williams' original version. Basim has noted his band's intention of using rhythm to express complex ideas that resist a potentially reductive, literal, facile interpretation (Imtiaz 2010b). The tempo of The Kominas's remake is slower than The Clash's version and is closer to that of Williams' original version. The Kominas' version also features the bass as it stands out prominently in the mix [Audio Example 4.3]. With syncopated variations such as dotted rhythms and triplets, Basim's bass achieves a rhythmic affinity to Williams' "swingy" feel [Audio Example 4.4] that is absent in the Clash's version [Audio Example 4.5]. Furthermore, The Kominas adopts a key lower than the other two versions, rendering it a lower and heavier "dub" feel. Three hefty bass punches open the song—so heavy that I could almost feel the lowest bass string flailing and bouncing on the fingerboard of the

bass guitar. The Kominas's bass accentuation, reverberant snare drum, and percussive guitar processed by the delay effect, makes the song sound grittier and weightier than the Will Williams' "riddim" track "Real Rock," originally produced by Coxsone and Sound Dimension.

With new Punjabi lyrics, The Kominas'ss version sets itself apart from the existing versions of the song. What surprises me is the band's choice to re-articulate the Rastfari theme omitted in the Clash's version. "Armagideon Time" is a fight song. The word "Armagideon" is the Jamaican Patois term for Armageddon, the spiritual battle between the forces of good and evil that is prophesied to take place in the "Mountain of Megiddo", in present-day Israel. In the Afrocentric, Rastafari worldview adapted by most Jamaican reggae artists of this period, this spiritual battle is elicited to overthrow the powers of Babylon, or the European colonizing oppressors, toward the end of a libratory return to Zion, or Africa. The beginning of the song evokes the state of desperation among the oppressed people, "A lotta people won't get no supper tonight / A lotta people going to suffer to tonight." The singer urges preparations to confront the oppressors, "'Cause the battle is getting harder / In this iration, it's Armagideon time." In the original version of the song by Willi Williams, the efforts to thwart the colonial power is fueled by the guidance of the Rastafari divine known as Jehovah, or Jah:[50] "But remember, to praise Jahovia[51]

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[50] The term "Jah" refers to the divine term of Jehovah in the Rastafari worldview. "Jah" is used in many reggae songs. The Wikipedia entry on "Jah" states the example of Bob Marley's song "Is this Love" in the line, "We'll share the same room, for Jah provide the bread." More on the usage "Jah" in Jamaican pop music, read Clarke, Sebastian. 1981. *Jah Music: The Evolution of the Popular Jamaican Song*, London: Heinemann Educational.

[51] The term "Jehovia" in the lyric of the song, however, has a less documented root. Upon a quick search, I found that "Jehovia" is used in the title and lyrics of contemporaneous reggae songs. An example of this

/ And he will guide you." The Clash revised the original lyrics to fit a more individualistic class-based struggle. "It's Armagideon / It's not christmas time." Opposing Armagideon to Christmas in the song's lyrics, the band arguably recontextualizes the Rastafari concern of racial oppression to express an anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist stance central in the British punk subculture in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Encountering the two notable versions of the song, The Kominas chose to re-insert the Jehovah allusion omitted in The Clash's version.[52] The English portion of The Kominas's lyrics contains an excerpt of the original chorus lyrics by Williams, "A lot of people won't get no justice tonight / A lot of people won't get no supper tonight /…/ And praise Jehovah." It also adds a variation to The Clash's lyrical amendment: "And remember to kick it over /… / and kick it out." The imperative command to praise Jehovah refers to the Rastafari roots of the original reggae tune by Williams. I suggest that The Kominas evokes the Rastafari spiritual imagery in order to reorient itself to its postcolonial homeland in Pakistan. In the now-classic punk monograph *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige describes a vastly transnational history of the transatlantic migration of the African people central in the Rastafari narratives that populate the content of many reggae songs. Commenting on the meaning of reggae to the West Indian immigrants in Jamaica and Britain, Hebdige writes:

reference can be found in a popular song in the mid 1970s titled "Jah Jah Jehovia" by Ronnie Davis. Read more about the use of the term "Jehovia" in Jamaican music read Clarke, Sebastian. 1981.

[52] The version by the British punk band The Clash, on the contrary, elides the lyrical reference to a spiritual divine and calls for a more individualistic and secular awakening to freedom. "Remember / To kick it over / No one will guide you / Through Armagideon Time." The sense of individualism is foreshadowed in an additional spoken verse embodying a vagabond spirit during the song's instrumental introduction. "Play around, don't stay around / This old town too long / Seems like I got to / Travel on!"

> Africa thus came to represent for blacks in the Caribbean forbidden territory, a Lost World, a History abandoned to the contradictory Western myths of childhood innocence and man's inherent evil. It became a massive Out of Bounds on the other sides of slavery. But beyond this continent of negatives where lay a place where all the utopian and anti-European values available to the dispossessed black could begin to congregate (1979: 32).

Profoundly infused with spatial details, Hebdige's narrative summarizes the Rastafarians' understanding of their postcolonial conditions and positions. Interpreting the anti-colonialism messages in the reggae songs of the 1960s, Hebdige foregrounds the Rastafarians' spatial orientation toward an "Africa." The movement toward a utopic Africa is an act of resistance against the history of European colonization.

The Kominas's version shows a rhythmic and lyrical proximity to Williams' over The Clash's version of the song. What may this suggest in terms of the band's psycho-musical geography? Via an Afro-Caribbean immigrant reinterpretation of the Christian bible, I argue, The Kominas borrows the power of a transatlantic Afrocentric spiritual belief. In doing so, the band to inscribes itself into the postcolonialist immigrant meta-narrative. The band adapts the Rastafari worldview while highlighting its South Asian and Muslim heritage in light of the stories of postcolony. I hear The Kominas calling for its own "Armagideon," in new lyrics collectively written in Punjabi by the band. According to Basim's translation, the first verse states: "We will only drink that / That they are drinking in Iraq / We will only drink that / that they would drink in Karballah."[53] It is not a coincident that both Iraq and Karbala are iconic battle sites, past and present. The War in Iraq after

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[53] This is Basim's "rough translation" of the original Punjabi posted on MTVdesi blog. Kishwer, 2010. "The Kominas Release 'Tunnnnnn'", *MTVdesi*, October 6, http://www.mtvdesi.com/2010/10/06/the-kominas-release-tunnnnnn/ (accessed on October 19, 2010).

the events on the September 11 has been a topical preoccupation by The Kominas

since its first album *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay* (discussed in Chapter Two). The

band has made clear its stance of castigating the "western" world for engaging in

warfare motivated by Islamophobia, militarism, and imperialism.

In comparison to "Armagideon" reference in the other two versions, The

Kominas's allusion to Karbala is less transparent. The battle of Karbala is a

significant event in Islamic history. For many Muslims, particularly the Shi'ahs, the

Battle of Karbala stands for suffering and martyrdom.[54] In the documentary film

Taqwcaore: the Birth of Punk Islam by Omar Majeed (2009), writer Michael

Muhammad Knight, along with Basim and Shahjehan of The Kominas, visit Bibi Pak

Daman, a Shi'ah shrine in Lahore, Pakistan. In the film, Knight's voiceover narration

of his quest for a punk-inspired heterodox Islam is juxtaposed with visual sequence

showing a large room of men performing *matam*, a ritualistic mourning for the

Battle of Karbala. In this ritual, the adherents, mostly men, strike or flagellate their

chests as a way to remember the suffering of Hussein ibn Ali, the heroic martyr who

died in the battle.[55] Additionally, in the film's trailer, the same footage is introduced

in the beginning of a collage of images of heterodox practices of Islam in Pakistan.

Knight's voiceover narrates in the trailer sequence, "I stopped trying to define punk

around the same time I stopped trying to define Islam. They aren't so far removed as

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[54] In this battle, the Islamic prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein ibn Ali led his supporters and family to thwart the military forces representing the first dynastic rule. Tragically Hussein ibn Ali died a martyr at this battle. Shia Muslims, as well as some Sunnis, commemorate the battle of Karbala every year in the month of Muharram. Read more about the Battle of Karbala, Aghaie, Kamran S. 2005. "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition," *TDR: The Drama Review* 49 (4): 42-47.

[55] Read more about the ritual of *matam*, Aghaie, Kamran S. 2004. *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shii Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*. Seattle, W.A.: University of Washington Press.

you'd think. Both began in tremendous births in truth and vitality, but seem to have lost something along the way." In both instances, I contend, the film seems to suggest that this sight of unfamiliar and intense devotion could in some way represent the transgressive ethos of taqwacore, an alternative practice of Islam inspired by punk. The concept of taqwacore, as articulated by the film and its promotion media, represents a category-defying rupture in the orthodox authority of Islam. If that's the case, then the Battle of Karbala, as a symbol of martyrdom, may offer an unusually rich and productive set of anti-establishment punk-inspired meanings appealing to the taqwacore advocates.

The parallel allusions to Karbala and Iraq make more sense when considered within the subversive ethical dimension associated with taqwacore. Both imageries conjure empathy for those suffering from a war. Embracing the abject and the martyr while challenging authority exemplifies a punk-inspired subjectivity. I argue that the battle of Karbala deploys a taqwacore ethic. On the *MTVdesi* blog, Basim's explains that the song's Punjabi lyrics explore the concept of khwaari, or khwaar hona, a Punjabi term referring to a state of destitution. Or more simply, he describes it as the state of "not getting what you want. e.g. We want alcohol, but there is no alcohol to be had." The song elaborates the feelings of destitution in terms of alcohol consumption. In its preoccupation over alcohol, this song follows a common theme within the qawwali and Punjabi song repertories, according to Basim (Kishwer 2010).

I will now explore the connection the Rastafari spiritual battle and a Pakistani state of destitution. Specifically I ask: Why would The Kominas

recontexualize a song about a Rastafari spiritual battle (or a class-based struggle in

Britain, in the case of The Clash's version) into a song about alcoholism? I contend

that The Kominas uses a "sordid tale of alcoholism" (Kishwer 2010) to resonate with

a lower-class voice in Pakistan. Keen on fine linguistic distinctions, the members of

The Kominas collectively wrote the lyrics in "hardcore Indian rickshaw driver

Punjabi…[that] casual Punjabi speakers seem to have a hard time with it."[56] During

their stay in Lahore in 2007 and early 2008, Basim and Shahjehan made efforts

toward starting a punk scene to reach across all classes of the people in Pakistan.

Using whatever resources at their disposal, they joined efforts with friends

including Mike Knight to organize a D.I.Y. punk rock show using whatever resources

at their disposal. After pasting black and white photocopies of a hand-drawn poster,

disputing over the class implications of music with an aloof (upper-class) Pakistani

man in the streets, they put on a successful performance event that took place on

the roof of an apartment building in a red light district. At this performance, they

were able to resolve the striking class-based divide in the Pakistani society, at least

temporarily. The show successfully brought together youth of the educated elite

class and the social underclass including street drummers and cross-dressed

dancers, also known as hijras (Majeed 2009). Aligning themselves with the youth of

the 1970s British punk rock scenes, the members and friends of The Kominas have

worked to instigate a punk-inspired class-based struggle in Pakistan. Imran

explained it later, "We'd like to see our music being played in taxis in Karachi as well

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[56] The Kominas' disclaimer of the linguistic inspiration for the song "Tunnnnnn" is stated in an email
message sent out to its news subscribers on October 4, 2010.

as in somebody's Mercedes" (Imtiaz 2010b). This unique version of "punk rock" not only calls for an inter-class solidarity in Lahore.

This version of punk rock, advocated by Pakistani American Basim and Shahjehan, along with their white American friend Mike Knight, ultimately is a response to their disillusionment with the United States. For Mike Knight, as a white blue-eyed Muslim convert, punk rock in Lahore means taking sides with the people, the innocent, and the castigated Muslims in the world, against the super power of the U.S. In the film, the sequence on the punk show ends when Mike Knight incites the "punk-ed up" crowd by screaming into the microphone "George Bush is a motherfucker" in Urdu. The crowd understood his defiance against U.S. military imperialism.

From the Pakistani American band members' perspective, the idea of punk rock in Pakistan is illustrative of their disillusionment. I relate this disillusionment to the politicized position of an abject minority. In an interview with the *U.K. Guardian* in 2007, around the time when Basim and Shahjehan relocated to Lahore, Basim remarks, "It seems weird to leave just when we were on the brink. If I'd stayed then I would have been playing to sympathetic white liberals. I didn't want that. In Pakistan, people want to rebel against the police and religious authority and punk is the perfect way to do that" (Butt 2007). The Kominas's orientation toward Punjab, Pakistan, and the rest of the South Asian subcontinent may be, in part, a minoritarian reparation. Their geographical identification with anti-U.S. punk Pakistan can be considered a response to the post-9/11 melancholic state of alienation. Through their creative adaptations of Punjabi musical roots and

transnational routes via the U.K., Jamaica, Africa, Karbala, and Lahore, the musicians

have built a psycho-social home in their music. This musical home resonates with

Josh Kun's notion of "audiotopia," an "almost-place" quality of utopia of the

imaginary landscape that individuals experience while listening to music. Kun

describes a visit to an audiotopic space as the following:

> almost-places of cultural encounter that may be physical places but
> nevertheless exist in their own auditory somewhere. The places music offers
> may not be material or tangible, but I know where I want to go when I want
> to get there. I can put on a song and live it, hear it, get inside its notes and
> chords, get inside its narratives and follow its journeys and paths (2005: 2-
> 3).

I have had similar experiences of visiting various sites of The Kominas' punk

transnation while listening to the music by The Kominas. I would imagine that it

produces similar effects for the fans and friends of the band. This musical home

ultimately provides a safe space for The Kominas and its listeners negotiate their

feelings of *not* belonging, and sense of lack of cultural citizenship (Maira 2009) in

the anti-immigrant, Islamophobic public in the U.S. In the following sections, I will

illustrate how this utopic home extends beyond the auditory terms of the music into

yet another "almost-place," a space of digital sociality.

The "Brown" Social Archipelagos

"Boston, Saturday June 5th, we're taking back the Middle East with the help of our
brother band @SunnyAliTheKid" – The Kominas on Twitter (THEKOMINAS, 2010a)

In the summer of 2010, The Kominas toured to the United Kingdom to

performed at two large-scale festivals, along with Al-Thawra, a Chicago-based

experimental crust punk band led by Syrian American Marwan Kamel. On this tour,

the bands shared a bill with the renowned British Asian hip hop techno band Fun-Da-Mental and Muslim hip hop group Poetic Pilgrimage and hung out with the members of Asian Dub Foundation who spearheaded the British Asian electronica scene. One of the highlights of the trip, according to The Kominas, is performing on Bobby Friction's radio show on the BBC Asian Network. Dubbed as "Friction," this radio show showcases "new and unsigned British-Asian music from Brixton to Bombay." Upon invitation, The Kominas recorded a four-song session featuring songs sung in South Asian languages, geared toward the British Asian community. The live session performance was later broadcast on the BBC.

Unable to travel to the U.K. to follow the band, I sat at home in central Virginia, looking for tour updates online. I monitored the social networking websites such as Facebook, Myspace, and the band's blog almost daily. Among the various social media outlets, the most active and interesting engagement, I found, occurred on Twitter, where I received instant "tweet" messages of 140 characters or less sent by The Kominas, Al Thawra and their followers. These tweets were publicly sent to and shared among the bands' followers. Using the "retweet" function, users could share these brief messages quickly and spread them to others users in disparate parts of the world. On Twitter, the radioshow host Bobby Friction promoted The Kominas heavily. Friction sent out a tweet, "tonight we go in hard with new emerging acts from Uncle Sam.... I'll be talking to @thekomina & @dasracist #brownyankees" (bobbyfriction 2010). In this message, Friction followed the convention of using a "hashtag" to group messages under a common topical label. Specifically he used the hashtag of "#brownyankees" to categorize his message. I

missed the message retweeted by The Kominas; but fortunately caught the one

retweeted by the other "brownyankees" group Das Racist. After the U.K. tour, the

band started using other related hashtags containing the word "brown" to provoke

online dialogues about global South Asian identities. For instance, The Kominas

used the hashtag "#brownbandreparations" to relay a message from its brother

band Sunny Ali and the Kid (THEKOMINAS 2010b).

What are the ethnic and geopolitical implications of "brown-ness" in The

Kominas's social world? The band's forging of a brown identity can be understood

as an anti-racist and anti-colonialism political gesture in discourses about rock

music and the postcolonial conditions. In an interview with *MTVigary,* Basim makes

note of the band's recent changes: "We're singing less and less in English. We may

pull a Bad Brains and phase the rock out all together!" (Kishwer 2010). Basim's

juxtaposition of "singing less and less in English" and "phase the rock out" is

intriguing. Both phrases imply a movement away from the center. Punjabi language,

in this example, represents a movement away from the English linguistic center in

rock music culture worldwide. The reference of the black hardcore band Bad Brains

further reinforces the movement of decentering the white-dominated genre of rock

and punk rock music.[57] In the same interview, Basim describes his goal being "To

get white people fluent in Punjabi, so they can teach it to brown people" (Kishwer

2010). In this provocative statement, Basim makes an analogy between the

historical fact of European colonialism and the Anglo-American dominance within

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[57] Bad Brains started as a Fusion jazz band, but came into fame as a hardcore band in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Later the band developed a strong reggae and metal sound, departing its genre anchors in punk and hardcore music. More about Bad Brains, "Bad Brains," *Wikipedia*, *The Free Encyclopedia,* http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bad_Brains&oldid=424145641 (accessed April 15, 2011).

rock music. Basim's prophesied "Punjabi Punk invasion" is more than just about language, as it aspires to shift the power center from "white" to "brown" people. Here Basim is hinting at a minoritarian global punk project. I read Basim's statement as an orientation to de-colonialize rock music, and subsequently, the global society.

This version of brownness is distinct from the brown-identified inter-ethnic and -racial solidarity that the band has formed to challenge the multiculturalist consumption of otherness (discussed in chapter two). Rather than crossing the *social* boundaries of ethnicity and race, this particular kind of brown identification traverses the *geographical* boundaries of east coast cities in the United States and more dramatically, across the Atlantic Ocean to the United Kingdom. This version of brown identification is inter-ethnic, but within the global South Asian, desi context. On the official band website, The Kominas describes itself as a "desi punk outfit comprised of four brown sons of South Asian parents." For the most part, the members of the band use the race-inflected label "brown" as a synonym for the ethnic terms of "desi" and "South Asian," inclusive of the band members of Indian descent.

Other times, I have observed, the band has used the term brown to strictly refer to a sense of Pakistani American fraternity. Outside the context of the band, the musicians have referred to their friends in other musical groups such as the psychedelic alternative country duo Sunny Ali & the Kid as their "brown brothers." In an *MTViggy* interview, Basim refers to the members of Sunny Ali & the Kid as

being "Phillistani,"[58] a term signifying the group's Pakistani background and home

base in Philadelphia (Kishwer 2010). The Kominas has labeled its birthplace as

"Bostonstan." After a series of relocations, two of the members are now based in the

so-called "Phillistan," neighboring their brown brothers. Building a friend network

that resembles extended "kinship" relations with Sunny Ali & the Kid and other like-

minded groups, the members of the band have created an imagined Paskistani-

American home base in the United States.

The close relationship between The Kominas and Sunny Ali & the Kid has led

to a formal united front when the two bands joined efforts in starting an

independent record label called Poco Party in 2010. Imran suggests that one of the

motivations behind starting Poco Party was to engage in the cultural process of

taste-making or, in his words, "establishing an aesthetic" (Imtiaz 2010a). This

aesthetic, I suggest, is related to the diasporic Pakistani and South Asian social

conglomerate fostered by The Kominas and its brother bands. Imran elaborates on

this aesthetic:

> We don't identify with Islam as much as we identify with our Pakistani heritage. Songs like "Pardesi"; you take a typical iktara [a traditional one-string instrument] riff and mix it with reggae and ska. That kind of stuff is exciting to us. The idea is not to fuse these kinds of music, but to take South Asian music and translate it into something where you use it with the instruments we know how to play because we grew up in America, we identify with rock culture and the instruments. And the idea of three to five brown kids making music… you can use your own vocabulary, so that's what

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[58] On *Twitter*, Basim playfully set his location as "Black Medina." A city in western Saudi Arabia, also the burial site for Prophet Muhammad, Medina signifies the second holiest city in Islam. A Black Medina thus is a more-real-than real locality that, rather hauntingly, conceals wherever he may be physically at the moment on the U.S. east coast. Basim's play on his virtual geo-location suggests a deferring of his actual physical location in the United States. Reframing his physical location using the mobile technology and digital social media can be read as a kind of pan-Islamic solidarity and possibly a resistance against the borders the U.S. nation-state.

we're doing, talking about things that we talk about between ourselves (Imtiaz 2010b).

The idea of translating musical elements from Pakistan and South Asia to be understood as "American" rock music, I argue, is more politicized than what it appears to be. In Imran's statement, the insistence to retain a Pakistani or South Asian identity integral to his personal experiences as an ethnic American is crucial. He rejects the mix-bag model of "fusion," and privileges the process of translation. I argue that this musical translation is a performative act. More than just an assertion of personal agency, this translation highlights the marginal position of the translator's as an "ethnic American," as someone who grew up listening to and loving rock music, but having never felt embraced by the culture surrounding the music. The idea of filtering American rock music through the lens of diasporic Pakistani experiences and South Asian sensibility allows a cultural space for the formerly invisible and silenced minority participants to feel a degree of social comfort and to voice their perspectives.

The design of the Poco Party website offers further insight into the record label's ethno rock aesthetic orientation. The background of the website is a map of the Indian Empire, exhibiting a very specific geopolitical moment in the world's colonial history.[59] Geographically speaking, the British Indian Empire, or the British Raj, colonized and governed the entire subcontinent of South Asia. Temporally, the British rule in the greater South Asia lasted almost a century beginning from 1857. The colonial rule ended in 1947 when British India was partitioned first into what

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[59] The map of the British India Empire is used as Poco Party's website background image on http://pocoparty.com/ (accessed December 10, 2010).

later became distinct nation-states known as India (Republic of India), Pakistan (Islamic Republic of Pakistan), and Bangladesh (People's Republic of Bangladesh). The historical Partition was based on the religious demographic divide in the area.

Why might the founders of Poco Party to enlist such a map to represent themselves? I argue that Poco Party's sensibility reflects a diasporic "brown" global community, and at times transcends the ethnic boundaries defined by the hyphenated Pakistani-American experiences. This transcendence is informed by a minoritarian subject position in the global, postcolonial context. The map of the British India, in this instance, reminds the web users of the historical British colonization of South Asia. On the record label's blog, Basim posted a provocative postcolonialist interpretation of the video game series Mario Brothers. In his analysis, Basim likens the evil Bowser's (the main antagonist) takeover of the Mushroom Kingdom as the British colonization of India; the heroic efforts of the Mario Brothers as the neo-imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan waged by the West; and the character of Toad to the Indian Raja (Indian ruling figure of the British Indian Empire). Alluding to Spivak's well-know article "Can the Subaltern speak?", Basim claims that he always empathizes with the *minor* characters in the video game, or the "mute sub-alterns" of the Mushroom kingdom. He invokes, "At the end of the day, we are all a bunch of turtles weary of white people jumping on us. They can collect extra life after extra life, but when we get stomped we're gone forever" (Poco Party, 2010).

Alternatively, the map of the British Indian Empire could be read as pre-Partition unification, geographically, ethnically, and religiously defined. This

unification could be expanded beyond the specific historical event of the Indian Partition in 1947. I have observed the notion of unification in practice as an emotional compass as a means to bring together individuals across various social barriers. At their stop in Charlottesville on the 2009 tour, the members of The Kominas accompanied Omar Waqar, the brainchild behind qawwali punk project Sarmust in the performance of his song "Return to Ambala." Strumming the chords on his acoustic classical guitar, Omar repeats the chorus lines: "They call it partition / it's more like separation," Omar and his backing band moved the crowd to join in a participatory call and response exchange reminiscent of a qawwali chant. I clapped and sang along, feeling an intense emotional unification with everyone in the room. In this instance, the notion of unification was broadened to fit the immediate context of 2009 United States. This articulation of brownness articulated a wide social space inviting of other misfits. The performance generously brought together the performers and the audience, Muslim or not, Pakistani or not, Asian or not, black or white.

Along with its brown brothers, The Kominas has adapted the notion of unification in flexible ways to relay empowerment in various settings. They have sought in their reparative tinge of a postcolonial brown, an infectious sense of liberation beyond the traumatic dyads, racially, ethnically, or religiously defined, within an ambiguous. Remapping the South Asian subcontinent as its own, they have worked to ameliorate the effects of imperialist colonialism of the past and the postcolonial social partitioning of the present.

The Taqwacore Digital Diaspora

The Kominas is known for its iconic role within the grassroots music culture self-labeled as "taqwacore." Mike Knight, the author of the novel *The Taqwacores*, coined the term in order reclaim a space for an alternative, punk-inspired practice of Islam. The Internet has often been considered as one of the contributing factors of the birth of the taqwacore scene (Crafts 2009). Using social networking site *Myspace* and email, Mike Knight reached out to various punk rockers of Muslim heritage living in North America, forming a network of friends and enthusiasts around the self-identified label of taqwacore. In the summer of 2007, Mike Knight joined together with five U.S. and Canada-based bands including The Kominas to make this online community into a physical reality. They organized the first "Taqwa-tour." The bands, along with friends, fans, documentary photographer Kim Badawi, and filmmaker Omar Majeed, toured North America, traveling from the U.S. east coast to the Midwest in a painted-green school bus that Mike Knight had purchased on eBay.

The Kominas's do-it-yourself network is comprised of Muslim-, South-Asian-identified, and other taqwacore-inspired musicians, listeners, artists, filmmakers, and bloggers. In a radio interview, bassist and singer Basim attributes the nascent formation of the taqwacore scene to the online communication between Mike Knight and the Muslim punk musicians across North America. Basim said, "I guess there were a lot of kids playing in various scattered bands, standard rock bands. Because, I guess, we all have Muslim names, we would be asked questions about Islam… We got in touch with each other. And we met lots of people who were into

punk, into Islam already…. The Internet played a big part in this. We all got

connected and I guess we tried to flesh out this idea of a cultural space" (Akbar and

Hsiao 2009).

I became aware of the taqwacore scene by first listening to an online radio

program that featured an interview with Basim, then via Twitter and Myspace, I

reached the members of The Kominas and scheduled a meeting in Boston [this

interaction is recounted in the beginning of the chapter]. After I met and

interviewed the band, I posted my review of the band's first album Wild Nights in

Guantanamo Bay on my blog YellowBuzz.org. Then I became known as one of the

taqwacore, or taqx, labeled by the "#taqx" hashtag on Twitter, in the digital social

terrain surrounding The Kominas. How I became embedded in the taqwacore scene

can illustrate the extent to which the social networks are supported by digital social

media. In *The Taqwacores Zine*, I read one of an apt description of this digital rite of

passage, an initiation "ritual" common to most followers of The Kominas and other

taqwacore bands. Zine contributor PaddyCakes, a West-Indian-identified twenty-

something-year-old woman who lives in Queens, New York, describes how she

became embedded into the scene:

> A few months into college in 2004ish, a friend of mine told me about this
> online makeshift book called the "Taqwacores." I didn't pay too much
> attention to it, but he made it a huge deal. He went on and on how there are
> kids out there like me, "brown kids, Muslim kids."… I check out online,
> bought the book off Amazon, and read it in like a day… Weirdly enough, as if
> Mike attached low-jack in the books, he added me on Myspace, then the
> Kominas, it spiraled into this huge community. I was excited! I spend loads of
> time chatting up kids all around the world about music… Up until a year ago,
> I finally met face to face with a few online Taqx kids. Moshing around
> together to songs we listened to over and over on Myspace, emailing each
> other mp3s that took forever to send since some of us still had dial-up (Foley
> and Rose 2010).

I became friends with PaddyCakes on Twitter, after reading her compelling

narrative in the zine. *The Taqwacore Zine* is basically six Xerox-copied double-sided

pages of text and pictures, stapled together. The font style is set in typewriter face.

In black and white ink, the aesthetics of the zine resembles the grassroots

publications of fan-zines in the punk scenes in London and New York during late

1970s and 1980s (Spencer 2005). The cover art is a collage consisting of skeletons,

zippers, a cartoonish drawing of a flannel-clad musician with scarf-covered face

holding a bass, and a shirtless Kurt Cobain [Figure 4.2]. The zine was compiled and

edited by Kait Foley and Britny Rose, both are active bloggers within the taqwacore

scene. Kait sent out a tweet announcing the availability of *The Taqwacores Zine*.

After corresponding with Kait via the Direct Message function on Twitter and

sending her $5 via Paypal, I received in the mail a large manila envelope containing

the zine, along with a homemade bootleg CD-R of a show recording featuring The

Kominas, and other taqwacore-related groups.
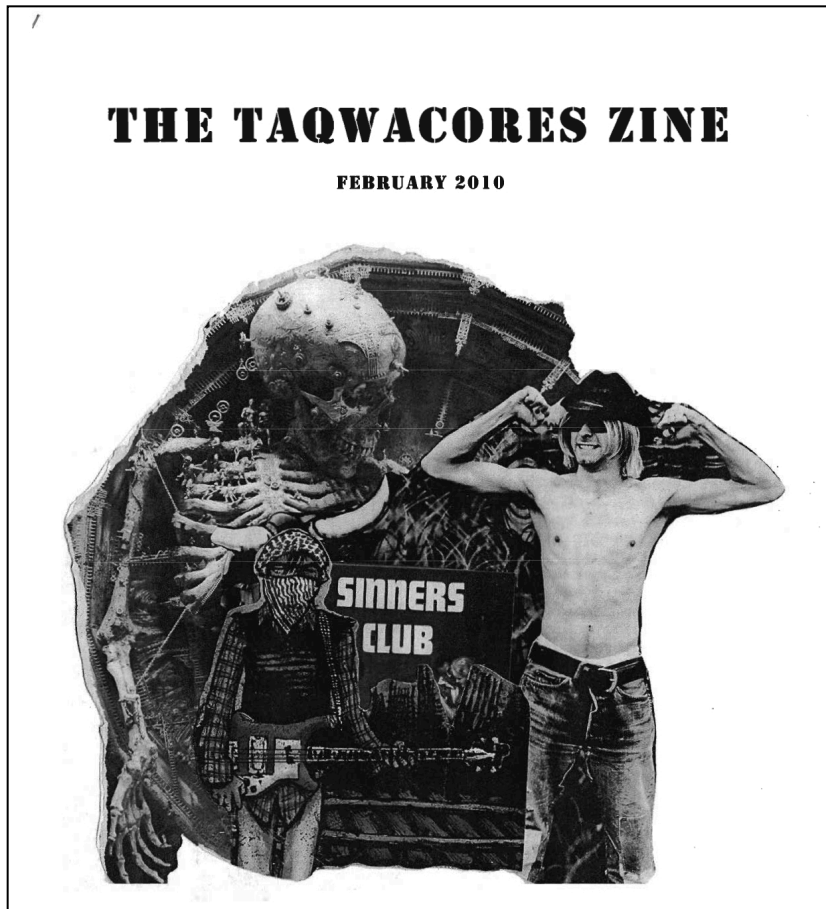
Figure 4.2: The cover of *The Taqwacores Zine*, courtesy of artist

In a punk grassroots manner, The Kominas has joined efforts with bloggers, music writers, and their friends and fans in creating a strong presence within various digital social spaces. Whether they self-identify or are marked as taqwacore or not, these individuals stake claims as to their existence in spite of alienation experienced in the physical world. The availability of free social networking software tools—Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, etc—has enabled the band to extend its social networks beyond the physical constraints of being home-bound in the U.S. Northeast, and of being Muslim, South Asian minorities living in North America.

In this section, I explore the spatial dimension of The Kominas's community, while asking: What does The Kominas's "digital diaspora" look like? To address this inquiry, I decided to transform into a digital ethnographer, documenting and analyzing the social interactions with a consciousness of the nature of digital media. I have become a cyborg-ish ethnographer, extending my physical self using various digital technologies. Hacking to break down software barriers, in a cyberpunk style, I set out to explore the digital social terrain constructed by The Kominas. I leveraged tools such as webscraping and mapping technologies, from field of the digital humanities. I will discuss the scholarly implications of these new digital ethnographic methods in the subchapter 4.1. And a technical elaboration of these methods appears in the appendix of this dissertation.

Using digital methods, I created a digital map that displays all of The Kominas's friends on Myspace in the world. The map of Kominas's social geography is hosted online.[60] For the purpose of this dissertation, as a textual document, I have taken a series of screenshots to demonstrate the depth and flexibility of this dynamic spatial visualization. Using this dynamic digital map, I have discovered new patterns of The Kominas's global friend networks. This map not only visualizes but also helps contextualize the stories of The Kominas's translocal occupation and preoccupation.

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[60] As of April 26, 2011, the dynamic map is hosted on my personal blog at: http://beingwendyhsu.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/kominasmap3.html
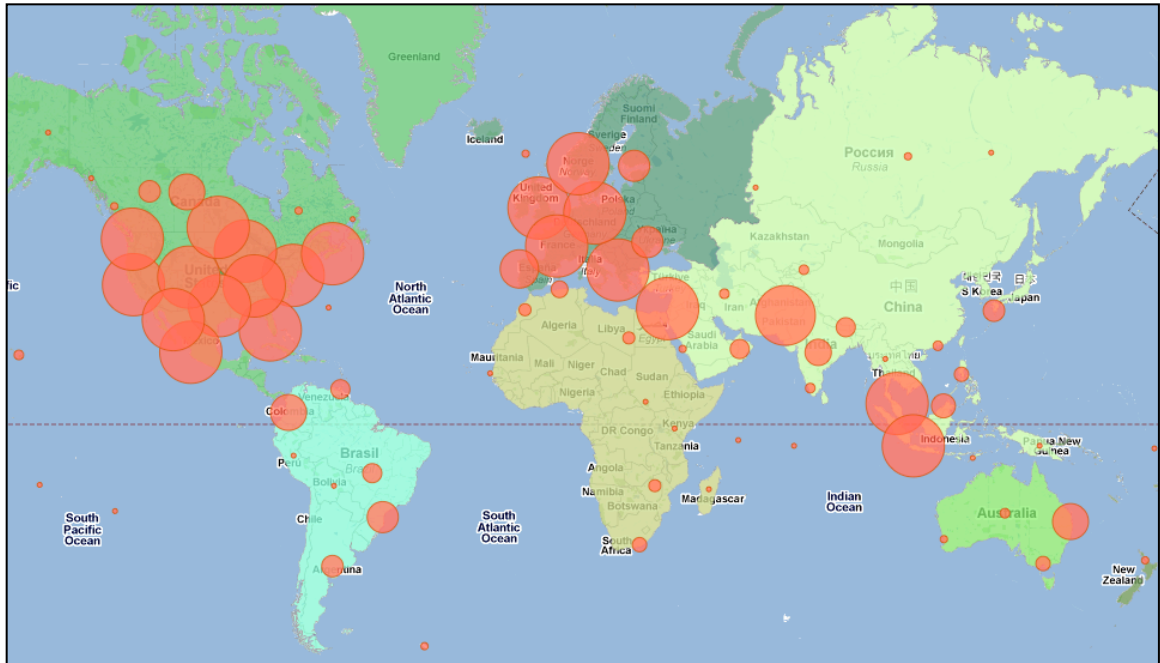
Figure 4.3 Map 1: The Kominas's *Myspace* Friend Distribution in the World

At a macro level, this map articulates a radically transnational and inter-continental distribution of friends [Figure 4.3]. A baselayer of the world's regions – marked by various shades of green in the background - helps contextualize the friend distribution across continental boundaries. According to the map, areas of high friend density include: North America, Europe, and Asia. But the story of translocality becomes more complex as we zoom in on the map to get more geographical detail.

The largest area of friend concentration is North America. After zooming in on this region, the map breaks down the general concentration to display the specific dense area spreading along on the northeast coast of the United States. This geographical concentration reflects the physical location of The Kominas's home in Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. The non-Northeast dispersion of friends in

North America seems to be concentrated in west-coast cities, and non-coastal cities such as Chicago, Atlanta, and Toronto. In addition, in yellow points, the map indicates various locations where the band has performed. Most of these North American cities are sites where The Kominas have performed. The band has been on two individual U.S. tours and performed at festivals in Toronto and Montreal on two separate occasions. Most of the band's performances, however, as shown in Figure 3.2, took place near its home in the northeast region of the United States.
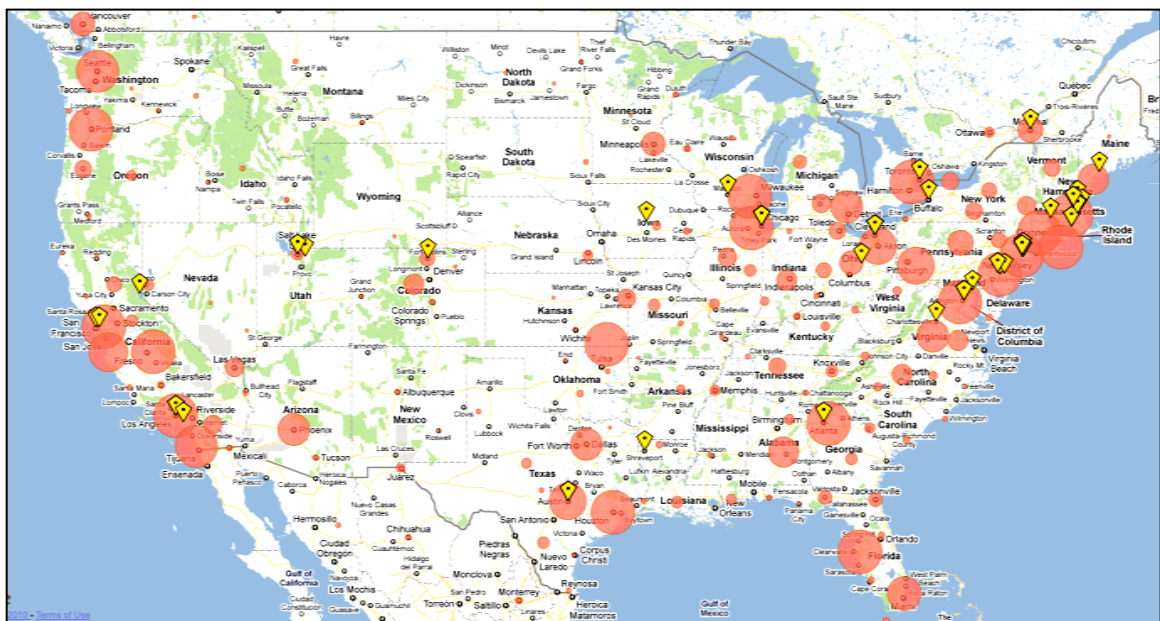
Figure 4.4, Map 2: The Kominas's *Myspace* Friend Distribution in North America

The Kominas has friends across the continent of Asia. On this map, shown in Figure 4.4, the densest areas of friends are located in the sub-regions of West, South, and Southeast Asia. With more detail, we find these dense areas to be localized

within the borders of these four nation-states: Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Israel [Figure 4.5].
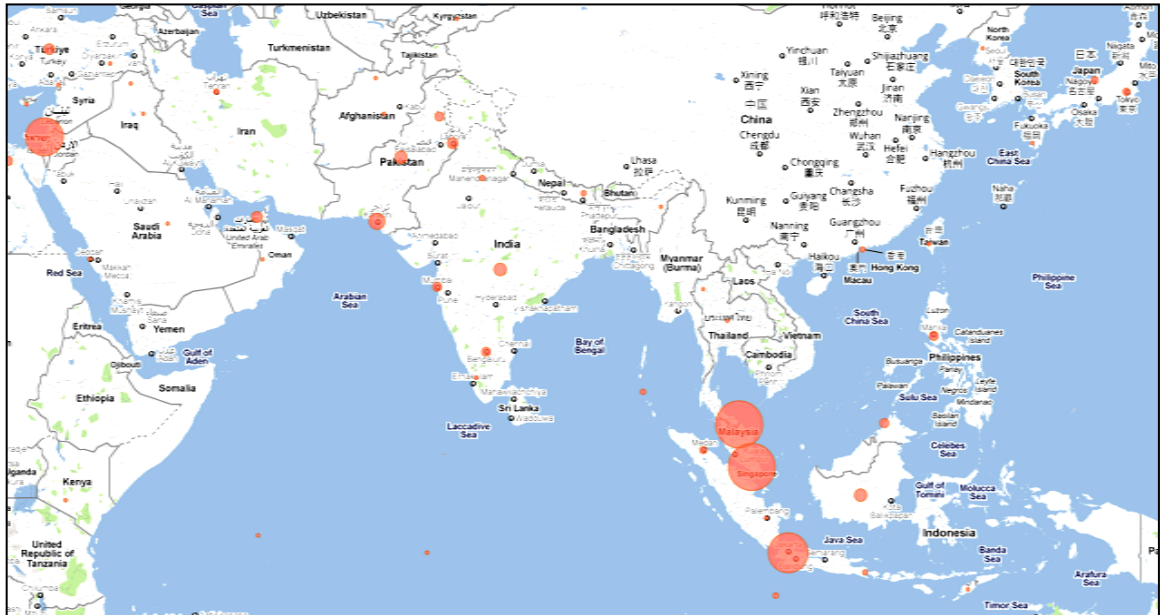
Figure 4.5, Map 3: The Kominas's *Myspace* Friend Distribution in Asia

The Kominas's connection to Pakistan is related to the band members' personal and heritage connections to the place. As discussed previously, Basim, Shajhejan, and Imran of The Kominas are all of Pakistani descent. They have spent significant time living in Pakistan. Basim and Shahjehan lived in Lahore and worked as journalists in 2008 and early 2009. They played in a band called Noble Drew and performed three shows: two in Lahore, one in Islamabad in June 2008 [Figure 4.6]. Drummer Imran went to medical school in Lahore. Basim and Imran, along with two friends they met in Pakistan, formed a band called the Dead Bhuttos during their tenure in Lahore.

Figure 4.6, Map 4: The Kominas's *Myspace* Friend Distribution in Pakistan

Imran has expressed that the goal of his band is to instigate an independent music scene as an alternative to the mainstream pop music industry in Pakistan. In an interview with a Pakistani newspaper on his recent trip to Pakistan, he notes:

> My take on the music industry here is that there are very few live venues here, one in Karachi and now one in Islamabad. But there is no place with proper sound and light that's dedicated to just being a proper music venue. Also, there are around six music channels but they don't seem to promote new music or do stories on bands that are just forming. They're not really like taste makers, they're just going with what sells, I find that kind of

frustrating. I think it can be changed, and it's one of the things we'd like to see through (Imtiaz 2010a).

Here Imran makes suggestions toward a transnational outreach for Poco Party, the record label that he started with his music colleagues in The Kominas and Sunny Ali & the Kid. Imran's state implies an independent or "indie" ethos. This indie ideology enables him to articulate a unique kind of Pakistani American nostalgia that is oriented transnationally toward Pakistan.
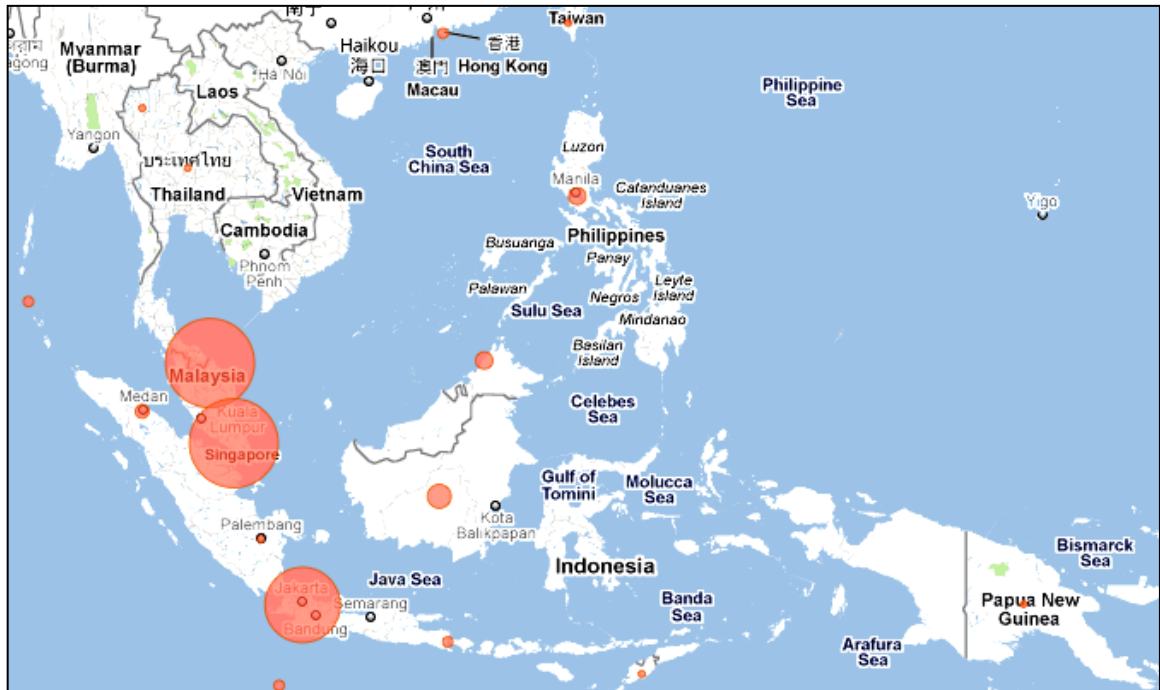
Figure 4.7, Map 5: The Kominas's *Myspace* Friend Distribution in South East Asia

The most surprising pattern I found on map 5 [Figure 4.7] is the extent of The Kominas's digital friendship Southeast Asia. Specifically, Malaysia and Indonesia stand out. These two countries are known for a strong presence of local punk scenes

in urban centers, in particular, Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia (Wallach 2008) and

Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. The Kominas is aware of its position relative

to the global punk terrain. In a recent interview, Basim launches a defensive remark,

reacting to the interviewer's comment about the geographic confinement of punk

within the Anglophone world. He says:

> What an ignorant question. Anglophone world? Punk is ten times bigger in Kuala Lampur [*sic*] than it ever will be in the UK, France, or Germany. Or America. No, the reason for forming the Dead Bhuttos, and the rush to put a single online was to show, at least cosmetically, that Pakistan was as capable of putting out punk rock as Turkey, Malaysia, Japan, and Lebanon. The USA is good to sell obscure Malaysian and Japanese records in, but it's not a good place to play this kind of music. We'd do much better in South Eastern Asia, which yes, we get a lot of traffic from online. Tons of people from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia add us. We've been covered in the major Malaysian music magazine. I think it makes more sense for us to play in Malaysia then it does to play in Europe (Rashid, et al 2010).

In his comment, Basim expresses his feelings of connection to Pakistan and

Malaysia. Putting these Asian punk scenes on the global punk map, Basim implies

his goal in de-centering the Euro-American hegemony of punk music.[61]

Would The Kominas's friend concentration in Southeast Asia be linked to the

fact that Malaysia and Indonesia have a Muslim-majority population? On the map in

Figure 4.8, I have highlighted all the countries of the world with a Muslim-majority

population in citrus orange. This map, surely, does not show a visible

correspondence between the band's friend community and the global Muslim

population.

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[61] As I'm finishing the dissertation, the taqwacore movements in Indonesia and Malaysia are emerging. Last October, Marwan Kamel, the frontman of Chicago-based taqwacore band Al Thawra started to use the "#IndoTaqx" and #Mtaqx# as an effort to locate and link all taqwacore-identified users on Twitter. So far there have been 60 tweets labeled with these hashtags. I will continue to monitor and document this formation of the transnational social networks.

Figure 4.8, Map 6: The Kominas's *Myspace* Friends Worldwide (Muslim Majority Countries in light gray)

Moreover, I have discovered that the marking of "Muslim majority countries" could potentially leave out nation-states with visible (but not majority) Muslim population. On the map [Figure 4.9], a surprisingly large cluster hovers over Israel. Surrounded by Muslim-majority countries, Israel's population is 75.5% Jewish. The Muslim-majority country distinction overshadows Israel's Muslims. Comprising of largest religious minority, Muslims in Israel, especially those who identify as Palestinians, have been politically active, despite the fact that this group constitutes only 16% of the population. The Kominas's friend connection to Israel may be less religiously than musically motivated. In Liz Nord's *PBS Frontline* documentary film about the emerging punk rock scene in Israel, a number of young musicians have

expressed ambivalence toward the Israeli versus Palestinian as a source of angst fueling their sense of punk identification. Even with these strands of information, I feel as if my cybernetic capacity could not offer any explanations of Israeli friend distribution. At its best, my map approximates a geographical and demographic context, an entry way into a rich, social narrative only to be unfolded by further ethnographic endeavors. A cybernetic *me* hits a dead-end wall constructed by numbers and visualizations, and starts craving for a peer-to-peer conversation.

Figure 4.9, Map 7: The Kominas's *Myspace* Friends in Israel and Nearby Countries (Muslim Majority Countries in light gray)

I think that I have over-estimated the effects of my hypothesized global "Muslim identity," a seemingly over-arching religious commonality, in the formation of The Kominas's transnational social world. Speaking with Basim about my map, I learned about a strong sectarian difference between the North American and the

Southeast Asian experience of Islam. Basim said that the Southeast Asian punk kids

that he has befriended online all seem to be "very religious." They pray five times a

day and question Basim for his lax observance of Ramadan. Rather than religion, I

argue that punk rock—or more generally rock music—has acted as a cultural

technology in the formation of The Kominas's digital community. As discussed in the

previous section, The Kominas translates rock music via a South Asian or desi

sensibility. In interviews, Imran has expressed that the band's identification

privileges ethnicity over religion (Imtiaz 2010b). The first time Basim and I met, he

explained to me one of the goals of the band: "With this group, we're kind of desi.

We've got a little bit of a South Asian vibe. We're just trying to put things out on

record in English for our little brothers and sisters in the world."

Finally, I have deployed the term "digital diaspora" to articulate The

Kominas's digital social geography. I extend the notion of a "virtual diaspora"

defined as "a metaphor for a terrain in which, due to experiential and historical

dynamics, social agents position themselves oppositionally as well as

opportunistically to the status quo or the dominant ideology" (Pinard and Jacobs

2006: 84). To highlight the digital social technologies used by the members of this

dispersed community, I insert the term "digital" to insist on the importance of a

technologically mediated context *and* method in ascertaining the contour and

content of this community.

The term "diaspora" connotes a sense of exile, migration, translocality, and

network. Deliberately, The Kominas works hard to construct a translocal home

away from home. This diaspora is marked by a shade of brown, a color indicative of

its South Asian ethnic belonging. This digital diaspora radically transgresses the

boundaries between the Muslim and the non-Muslim territories, a highly charged

geographical distinction after September 11. It also traverses the Orientalist East-

West binary, a geopolitical construction that reinforces the differences between the

two halves of the world on either side of the Levantine Coast (Prashad 2001; Said

1979). In articulating the radical post-nationality of this diaspora, I hope to join the

efforts of Josh Kun and his colleagues in American Studies to create scholarly new

scholarly discourse to undo generations of U.S. and white-centric scholarship on the

Americas. These maps highlight and remedy scholarly "mistakes" such as: "ignoring

racial, ethnic, and sexual difference because it disrupts the national fantasy;

enforcing whiteness as Americaness, obligatory monoculturalism as political and

cultural citizenship" (Kun 2005: 20).

Figure 4.10, Map 8: The Kominas's *Myspace* Friends Worldwide (Satellite View)

These maps show not a cyberpunk fantasy, but a social reality that has spawned in a digital space. The Kominas has reconfigured the world's map and created its own unique ethnicized punk rock diaspora. This emerging transnational friend-territory, shown in Figure 4.10, is not just an imagined community. It is a cultural and social space created by punk rock sound and the exchanges of mix-tapes, mp3s, face-to-face visits, shows, tweets, zines, blog posts, hyperlinks, virtual hugs, encouragement and strength.

Here is a network of friend-islands – like an archipelago, scattered across bodies of water. This space has enabled many misfits, "brownies," immigrants, queers, and punks to congregate and interact without feeling like an outcast. PaddyCakes captures this sentiment in her contribution of *The Taqwacores Zine*: "It's feeling a sense of understanding, a beginning point. We are all still so different from each other. Taqx isn't about who's more hardcore than who, or which is the loudest, or even who wears the most spikes. It's about the sheer happiness we have seeing each other and as soon as we do, hugs are given away freely" (Foley 2010).

To conclude, I hope that by articulating, quite literally, the contour and shape of this space, via the technique of web mapping, I have extended Josh Kun's conception of audiotopia from the realm of feelings, reacting to the sonic qualities of music, to the realm of the social and eventually, the physical. Working toward a shared post-national utopian vision, the musicians assert their creative agency in both musical performance and social actions. In the case of The Kominas, music-making has led to various facets of social organizing and real-life consequences such

as D.I.Y. tours, recording production, performance exchanges, hangouts, and record label formation.

Borrowing from Foucault's (metaphoric use of) archipelago, The Kominas's archipelago, as illustrated in my digital ethnographic project, is in fact "physically dispersed yet at the same time covers the entirety of a society" (Foucault 1980: 196). Unlike Foucault's archipelago, The Kominas's counterpart is not a punitive system itself, but is a subversion of one. It is in a constant struggle to survive and flourish in the midst of past and present global inequities left over from the historical colonial legacy. A steadfastly growing network, this global archipelago fosters a refuge for its member islands, while countering the forces that impinge upon its dispersed but powerful existence. I am writing this as I recall the taqwacore response to support the recent political events in Egypt, Tunisia, and their neighboring countries. On February 11th, 2011, the day the Egyptian dictator Mubarak fell, Bay-area-based activist/blogger TazzyStar tweeted a statement that represents a transnational, taqwacore-inspired anti-status-quo solidarity to support the revolution. Her unequivocal statement invoked: "Revolution is taqwacore" (TazzyStar 2011). This message as retweeted by many people that day. I was one of them.

Subchapter 4.1: A Methodological Intervention:
Mapping, Data-Mining, and Digital Ethnography

A recent article in the *New York Times* highlights the emerging frontier of the digital humanities. Summarizing the digital humanities for a general audience, this article identifies a key turn toward "data" and methodology in the disciplines within the humanities. The author Patricia Cohen positions this turn away from the theoretical examination of the "ism", to the exploration of "how technology is changing our understanding of the liberal arts" (2010). Among the digital projects discussed by Cohen, all are textually or archive-based projects from fields such as literature and history. But, what does this methodological turn mean for ethnomusicologists? This is especially a pressing question considering that the cultural and social processes that we investigate are increasingly mediated and built by digital technologies.

In this subchapter, I ask: how can digital technology facilitate field research and ethnographic writing? What might be the theoretical implications of these new methods? These are huge questions. I will attempt to answer these questions while drawing on my own experiences with digital ethnography. This will then lead to further speculations, questioning, and thought-experimenting. I hope that by doing so, we can start to embed ourselves deeply within the various digital environments, within which we work and conduct research.

Conventionally, ethnographers (in cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, and cultural sociology) have privileged the traditional, non-mediated, live, and

experiential over the fixed, mediated, and textual, in their field research (Ginsburg,

Lughod and Larkin 2002: 3). In the last decade or so, ethnomusicologists and

anthropologists have started to see the value in studying non-physical and

mediated, and oftentimes software environments. Theoretically, they have begun to

extend the notion of the field. In the effort to study media as social practice, cultural

anthropologists have compiled three volumes of essays: *Connected: Engagements

with Media* (Marcus 1996). *Anthropology of Media* (Askew and Wilk 2002); *Media

Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Ginsburg, Lughod, and Larkin 2002). In

ethnomusicology, specifically with the publication of two essay sets—*Music and

Technoculture* (Lysloff and Gay 2003) and *Wired for Sound: Engineering and

Technologies in Sonic Cultures* (Greene and Porcello 2005)—scholars have begun to

engage with media and technology as central facets of cultural practices involving

music.

Comprising an "ethnography of media," these studies represent a recent

strand within scholarship that doesn't shy away from examining media objects and

practices, however situated within related social and cultural contexts. But in only a

few among these studies, the ethnographers have foregrounded technologically

mediated (digital or not) methods in their field research. Let me elaborate on this

distinction. In her contribution to *Wired for Sound*, Louise Meintjes examines the

meaning of "overseas" among recording artists and engineers inside a recording

studio in South Africa. Methodologically, Meintjes analyzes the conversations in the

studio and musical expressions as gestures or performed utterances that emerge

from a certain political context (2005). In her monograph *Sensational Knowledge,*

Tomie Hahn centralizes the process of (re)viewing a video recording as a method to understand the transmission of *nihon buyo*, Japanese traditional dance. The ability to rewind and watch the video in slow motion allows a close-up access to the subtlety of the transmission process and the embodied practice of dance (2007:78-9).[62] In the first instance the ethnographer (Meintjes) is concerned with the meanings of media and technology, as objects of analysis; in the second instance, however, the ethnographer (Hahn) integrates media technology as a process or method of investigation. The methodological distinction between these two studies points at the crux of my present inquiry.

How may digital tools facilitate the methods of participant-observation, or specifically the processes of observing and participating in, cultural and social practices now more digitally mediated than ever? Digital media and technology make up facets of contemporary social and cultural life. Email and engagement via digital social media are becoming a normative mode of interaction for individuals in many societies. Current ethnographers are acquainted with using digital communication methods to find, reach, and contact their informants. During the early stage of my field research, I spent countless hours locating musicians online, using either Google or social network sites such as Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, and Last.FM*. Myspace, for instance, is the fourth the most popular English-language websites in the world. As of 2008, Myspace has more than 110 million monthly

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[62] Gretchen Schoel offers an ethnographic account of a live, real-time Internet blues jam that she organized between blue musicians in Tokyo and Clarksdale, Mississippi. Her inquiry points at the intersection of cultural and material technology. The blues jam is a specific incident where cultural technology of blues music is tweaked according to the aesthetic particulars of the material technology of the Internet and the Internet-mediated sounds and sight of the blues performance. For more, read "Filling in the Blanks: Lessons from an Internet Blues Jam," *Japanese Cybercultures*, ed. Gottlieb, Nanette and Mark J. McLelland. New York: Routledge, 2003.

active users in the world; among them, 8 million music artists and bands (Owyang 2008).

How can we as ethnographers take a snapshot of these digital social media interactions? Some ethnographers have extended methods of participant-observation into online communities, conducting email and online questionnaires (Caspary and Manzenreiter 2003; Murthy 2007) and analyzing user-created discourse in chat rooms (Nakamura 2002), on discussion boards and newsgroups (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996; Lysloff 2003), fan and artist websites (O'Reilley and Doherthy 2003; Pinard and Jacobs 2006), and social networking sites (Murthy 2008a). In a succinct article about digital ethnography, sociologist Dhiraj Murthy has outlined the intellectual potentialities, limitations, and ethical concerns of four new technologies: online questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites, and blogs (2008b). Less conventionally, in the format of a video posted on Youtube, cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch puts forth a provocative statement of "The machine is us/ing us." Recognizing the extent to which contemporary social life is embedded into the digital online environment, namely the Web 2.0, Wesch advocates for a set of digitally empowered methods to explore this new sociality. These new media tools use software language of hypertextuality (HTML) and meta expression (XML) among a few others, to structure users' experiences and data within the information worlds. Wesch's video unleashes not only the educational potentials in learning software tools, but also gestures toward the intellectual appropriation of machine language for social sciences and humanities inquiries (2007).

In my digital ethnography project, as described in chapter four, I have

learned that technology not is an opposition to, but is the core of the live and

embodied musical life of my musician-informants. Based on that premise, I devised

a way to implement digital methods not to distract from the ethnographic goal of

close social engagement and empirical finding. I designed them with a goal to

further the humanist inquiries that I have derived from my field research and

literature review. Methodologically, I position digital methods as a means to achieve

"radical empiricism," a term that I use to describe my goals in finding and

documenting socio-musical processes with empirical specificity within the digital

social environments. To achieve that in my project, I first brushed up on my

knowledge of HTML, gleaned as a high school student of a science and technology

magnet school, and immersed myself in the learning of the software programming

language of Ruby.[63] I employed the technique of "web-scraping,"[64] the process of

mining data from the Internet, in order to capture social networks of the bands in

this dissertation. With the help of the University of Virginia's Scholars' Lab, I wrote a

program to parse out the relevant information in the source code of the profile web

pages of The Kominas's Myspace friends.

Last December, I attended the THATCamp (The Humanities and

Technologists Camp), an "unconference" where humanities scholars and

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[63] Ruby is an object-oriented programming language that combined syntax inspired by Perl. It originated in Japan in the mid-1990s. To read more about the history, semantics, syntax, and other aspects of Ruby, read the Wikipedia entry, "Ruby," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ruby_(programming_language)&oldid=425144797 (accessed April 21, 2011).

[64] Web-scraping refers a complex set of programmatic methods to extract information from web pages. Read more about web-scraping: "Web Scraping," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Web_scraping&oldid=424921951 (accessed on April 18, 2011).

technologists congregate to offer provocations and practical solutions to the digital

humanistic scholarship.[65] At this gathering, hosted by the UVa's Scholars' Lab, I

began to contemplate: What would happen if we, academic ethnographers, adopt

mobile technologies such as Twitter when we are "in the field" physically removed

from our everyday "home"? A thought experiment: let us imagine the incorporation

mobile and GPS technology into field research, linking live and physical interactions

in the field with virtual hubs of communities and information. For instance, NPR

journalists used Twitter to publish flash field reports on, and Google My Map to

represent the affected locales of the wildfires in Southern California in 2007

(Folkenflik 2007).[66] In similar ways, ethnographers can generate, post, and map

instant field reports on digital mobile platforms. I am not suggesting that mobile and

geospatial technologies may replace conventional field methods. Instead I am

invoking an ethnographic practice that could integrate these technologies to help

the ethnographer become aware of his or her interactions, live and virtual, with

more geospatial precision. Also, the capacity of sharing field findings spontaneously

and publicly may attract more informants and co-field reporters, thereby

contributing to the multiplicity of voices reporting on field events that can later be

analyzed by the ethnographer. Mobile technology would facilitate the gradual

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[65] The first THATCamp unconference was hosted by the Center for History and New Media at George Maason University. THATcamp is growing movement. Of international interests, it now meets in locations across the world. To find out more about THATCamp, visit the official website [http://thatcamp.org/] or follow the #THATCamp hashtag on Twitter.

[66] There is in fact an emergence of commercial websites (for example, Ushahidi.com) that generate and crowdsource field reports. Crowdsourcing, according to Wikipedia, is the outsourcing the task of gather data to "an undefined, large group people or community, through an open call." More on crowdsourcing, read "Crowdsourcing," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,* http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Crowdsourcing&oldid=425634742 (accessed on April 24, 2011).

breakdown between the field and home in conventional projects and could potentially democratize the process of fieldwork.

Ethnographic writing involves a set of processes distinct but related to field research. What technological extensions may further the tasks of documenting, analyzing, articulating, and representing field observations and interactions? I have witnessed an emergence of blogging as field note-taking among my peers in ethnomusicology. My colleague Lee Bidgood blogged to document his field interactions with bluegrass musicians in the Czech Republic during his time abroad while using this blog as a way to forge transnational links between him and his musician-informants, dispersed across Europe (2008). Ben Tausig, PhD candidate at New York University, uses his blog Weird Vibrations as a multimedia platform to archive and analyze his photo, text, audio, and video field recordings while he is doing field work in Bangkok this year (2011).

During the course of my field research, my blog Yellowbuzz.org became an important site of interactions between me, my musician-informants, and their friends and fans. These blog posts often times follow specific encounters that I have had with musicians in performance and in interview. I have shared blog posts containing text, audio, and video related to the musicians in my dissertation. These publicly accessible posts allow my musician-informants to comment of my observations and analysis. I take the musicians' feedback into consideration as I create my ethnographic narrative. This information feedback cycle breaks down the conventional barrier between the creation and reception of academic knowledge. In this information network, field informants have an opportunity to contribute to the

process of ethnographic analysis and representation. The circularity of this information feedback network is illustrated a picture that I found on an online photo stream about The Kominas's 2009 tour on the photo social-network website Flickr. Nyle, Basim's younger brother, joined the tour as a field researcher for Dhiraj Murthy. Murthy was studying the effects of social media on the formation of the taqwacore scene so he hired Nyle, his student at the time, to document and tweet highlights of the tour. Nyle captured an interesting ethnographic moment when Shahjehan was reading my blog post about his band while the band was still on tour.

In some instances, my role as blogger has helped me gain a closer access and insight into the musicians' social and musical life. After I met The Kominas at the South Street Diner, I wrote a blog post about the band's first album. The band shared this album review with its fans and friends. In response, Arjun, The Kominas's guitarist at the time, wrote to me in a personal message on Facebook elucidating his ethnic identification and his ambivalence regarding mainstream media's take on taqwacore. James_NMD, a close friend of the band, commented on my blog post by offering an insight into Basim's bass-playing.

To continue, I would like to explore the possibilities of alternative methods of representing and analyzing ethnographic interactions. I'm a visual thinker. I enjoy learning via visualizations and maps. Until recently, "mapping" has been applied only metaphorically as a spatial theoretical framework in many humanities disciplines including music (Bohlman 1996; Caspary and Manzenreiter 2003; Schein 2002; Swiss, Sloop and Herman 1998). Traditionally, ethnographers insert a single page map in the beginning of their monograph locating their narratives on a map.

What happens when ethnographers investigate communities comprised of multiple sites, some on- and others off-line? A digital map could not only encapsulate the geographical coverage of these new projects, but also articulate the intricate dynamics of social interactions across various geographical boundaries. For instance, The World Musical Map project by Ozan Aksoy [Figure 4.11] based at the New Media Lab at the Graduate Center of CUNY explores the rupture between audio boundaries and actual national borders (2010). In my digital project, I used Open Layers, a web-mapping tool, to map the *Myspace* friend networks of the musicians in the study. This series of geospatial visualization[67] have enabled me to see patterns of social linkage that I hadn't anticipated. They also allowed me to generate more questions about ethnic belonging and transnational communities.
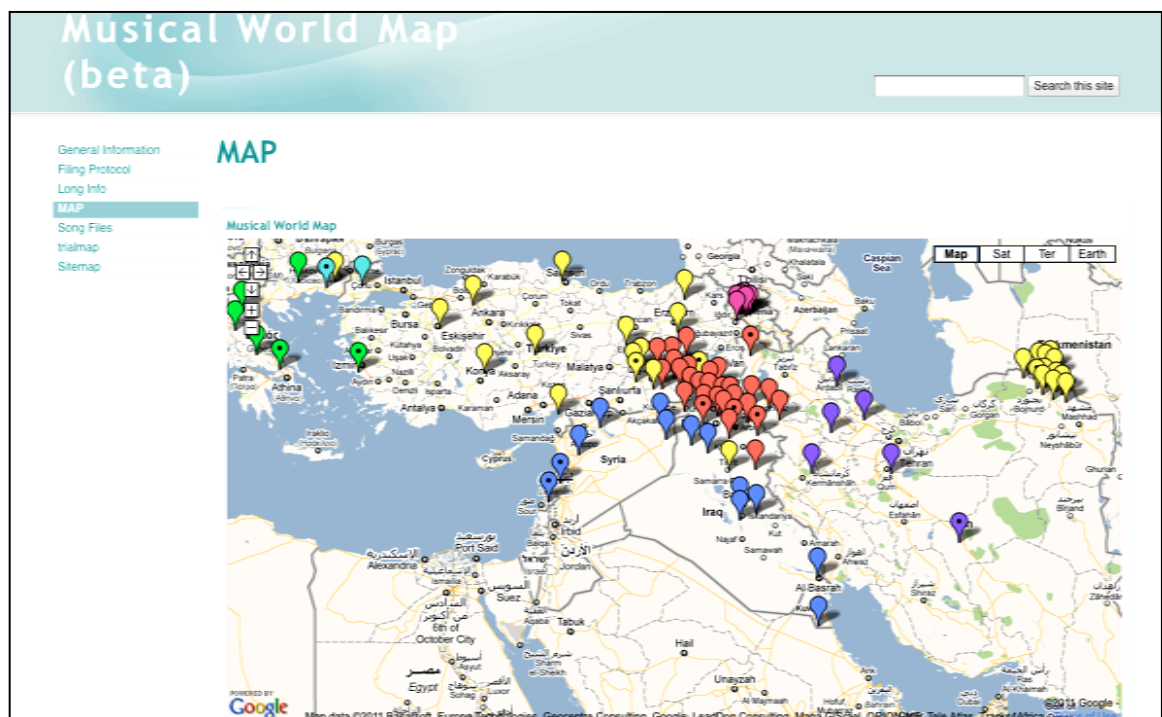
Figure 4.11: Musical World Map (beta), screenshot taken on January 10, 2011

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[67] As of April 26, 2011, the dynamic map is hosted on my personal blog at: http://beingwendyhsu.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/kominasmap3.html

So, what other digital methods could extend our capacities as ethnographic documentarians and analysts? *Vectors*, a web-based journal that uses electronic multimedia to represent scholarly material, has published a few ethnographic projects in a digital form. In a project entitled *Digital Dynamics Across Cultures*, Kim Christen explores alternative methods to present digital photographs and videos that she created in collaboration with the Warumungu men and women during her field research in Australia. Working with the technical team of web and graphic designers at *Vectors*, Christen devised a dynamic audio-visual presentation platform that follows and displays the dynamic logic of "proper" knowledge transmission, faithful to the kinship and ancestral networks of the Warumungu people. In doing so, she created an ethnographic website with an "internal logic [that] challenges conventional Western notions of the 'freedom' of information and knowledge sharing' as well as legal demands for single-authored, 'innovative,' original works as the benchmark for intellectual property definitions" (Christen 2006). Christen's work exemplifies the strengths and flexibility of digital multimedia media as a platform of scholarly ethnographic publication. Through an engagement with multiple senses, the unique combination of the ethnographic content and form reflects the worldview and epistemological specificity of the group of people that she interacted with during fieldwork.

Finally, I will address the intellectual and social advantages (and disadvantages) of digitizing an otherwise live and non-mediated experience or interaction. Digital humanists have developed an emerging set of sophisticated theories around the issues of texualization and archiving. To relate to those

inquiries, I consider the act of ethnographic writing as a form of textualization (Clifford and Marcus 1986). So in the instance of articulating field data, we may be creating an archive of texts that interpret cultural practices. If that's the case, my digital maps make up a cultural archive that documents the musicians' social life in my project. Digital text is more flexible than printed text (Wesch 2007).

More flexible than conventional archive (a published journal article or book), a digital archive can be closer to life because it is akin to the practice of building a repertory from which performers and agents draw scripts, meanings, and inspirations. Digital texts are also more collaborative than printed media (Wesch 2007). Digital publications of research, in the form of blogs or discussion forums, position the researchers in the more accountable position, "as respondents have the opportunity to engage publicly with the research process and its outputs" (Murthy 2008b). In publishing my maps on my personal website, I was able to easily share these visualizations with my musician-informants. Basim got excited about the idea of using my map to pitch a tour to Malaysia and Indonesia. I thought that my map could be just another layer of my participation as an academic ethnographer within The Kominas's world. Digital ethnography could be the future of public or applied ethnomusicology. My hope is that these provocations would hopefully encourage ethnographers to think about and act on the experimental possibility and pragmatic processes of digital ethnographies.

<u>A Dis-Orientalizing Cyberpunk Mission</u>

To conclude this subchapter, I will offer a rather unconventional narrative that remarks on social ecology—mediated by digital technology and the postcolonial—within which The Kominas and I are embedded. In this section, I will address the racial and postcolonial politics implicated in the current terrain of digital culture by first recounting a specific social exchange between The Kominas and me on Twitter. This exchange points our alliance with the controversial media icon M.I.A., a British rapper of Sri Lankan descent whose recent musical projects have struck a chord with cyberpunk literature and postcolonialist rhetorics. My description of M.I.A.'s cyberpunk engagement will eventually lead to a note that addresses the critical positionality of my role as an Asian American digital ethnographer and cartographer.

At a coffee shop in downtown Dover, New Hampshire, I get a message from The Kominas on Twitter about M.I.A.'s latest mixtape Vicki Leekx (THEKOMINAS 2011a). I follow the hyperlink included in the tweet and land on a blog post on MTVDesi about M.I.A.'s new mixtape. Meanwhile, The Kominas carries on a short conversation with its friend @bdvz in Sydney, both expressing support for M.I.A.'s politico-musical agenda. Quickly pointing at another link, I jump to M.I.A.'s mixtape site, created exclusively for her listeners to download her mixtape. A simple website, Vickleekx.com is presented with a design scheme reminiscent of web pages of the early to mid 1990s. A mash up of low-tech-looking images includes on the right, a large spinning globe, and the left, two identical overlapping screenshots of a browser window, a large "ViCKi LEEKX" banner in a shiny visually loud golden font. After downloading and zooming on the "clip art"

graphics below the banner, hacking my way through the visual scheme of the website, I

discover further graphical details, for instance, the text "United States Federal Reserve

System" superimposed over an image of a globe. The other textual and image

iconography of the Internet displayed on the web page, I think, represents the polemics

regarding freedom of speech and global communication in the so-called Internet age

[Figure 4.12]. Finally I click on the giant red "DOWNLOAD" button on the bottom of the

page to download the mixtape file. Upon a prompt, I enter my email address. I open an

email from Vicki Leekx: "Thank you for your interest in Vicki Leekx. To get your free

download, click on the link below." Exchanging my email address and an agreement to

the terms of use of the mixtape (without consciously thinking about what I may be

losing in terms of my rights to privacy), I click to download the 87-megabyte mixtape

file.[68] Now listening to M.I.A. rapping about media freedom and giving Sri Lankan

shoutouts over thirty-something-minute of a continuous mashup of digital blips and

samples of media cliché, I continue to browse the web.

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[68] My original narrative, posted on my blog, lacked an account of Vicki Leekx' request for my email address, in exchange for the download link of the mixtape. Ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall pointed out in his reply tweet (http://twitter.com/wayneandwax/status/27437787745619968) that users are required to 'pay' with their email address. Indeed, the email sent by Vicki Leekx states, "To get your free download, click the link below. By clicking Confirm and Download, you agree to the terms of this promotion and to receive future email updates from Vicki Leekx. You agree to receive future emails from Vicki Leekx and M.I.A." This transaction does seem less than innocuous than what I had hoped for. The users, at the very least, give up the rights to email privacy in exchange for the "free" download of the mixtape. I can only hope that M.I.A. will do something subversive, in line with her cyberpunk agenda, with this list of email addresses.

Figure 4.12: Screenshot of Vickileekx.com, captured on January 12, 2011.

In a few minutes, I found myself entangled in an information network that transcends several geographical boundaries. The Kominas's message was sent via an iPhone, mobile device by one of the members of the band physically located in the northeastern United States. I received the message via the web through Twitter.com, while sitting at a coffee shop in New Hampshire, perhaps a few hours away from the physical location of the band's members. On Twitter, I read a few short conversations between The Kominas and its friends worldwide. Following the link included in The Kominas's tweet, I visited a handful of virtual sites including: Vickileakx.com and MTVDesi.com, the website of the broadcasting offshoot from MTV that targets audiences of South Asian descent in the United States and other English-speaking locales in the world. What The Kominas led me into was a microcosm of a musico-social information network that ties together individuals sharing a cluster of interests in desi social and cultural life: an Internet-based camaraderie loosely based on a South-Asian-identified sensibility.

Born Mathangi "Maya" Arulpragasam, M.I.A. is a Sri-Lankan-British rapper whose claim to fame worldwide was her song "Paper Planes" on the soundtrack of blockbuster hit *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle 2008). Daughter of a Tamil political activist, M.I.A.'s music centralizes political themes, especially toward immigrant rights, and expresses an audacity to challenge governmental and corporate authorities. Around the time she released her third album *Maya* in spring 2010, M.I.A. began to speak up about information politics and Internet censorship. In the midst of the heated discussions about *WikiLeaks*, over the exposing of confidential governmental and corporate documents via the Internet, the rapper expressed a public support for WikiLeaks (_M_I_A_, 2010d). Last November, M.I.A. made an announcement of her (Internet) alter ego dubbed as Vicki Leekx (_M_I_A_ 2010c).

I argue that Vicki Leekx is not a direct endorsement of WikiLeaks; it is a project inspired by WikiLeaks. Similar to WikiLeaks, M.I.A.'s alter ego (and mixtape) characterizes a possibility for social changes through disseminating cultural content on the Internet. WikiLeaks has posed a threat to national security; the U.S., China, Iceland, and Australia have filed lawsuits against the website. It has challenged the international financial infrastructures maintained by corporate power and control. Similarly, M.I.A.'s "Vicki Leekx" project targets those of media, cultural, and political power. Her conceptualization of the Internet as a free space is affirmed by her recent battle with media censorship. After finding out that Youtube had pulled her controversial music video "Born Free", M.I.A. self-released the video by hosting the it on her website.

More explicitly than WikiLeakx, Vicki Leekx is positioned within a postcolonialist, pro-minoritarian struggle, a political context that M.I.A. has articulated in her music and social media. The term "Vicki Leekx" is a phonetic play on "Wiki Leaks." The phonetic substitution of a V for a W inflects a South Asian accent within English pronunciation. In ethnicizing the English pronunciation of WikiLeaks, M.I.A. evokes the less heard colonized subject position of the desi in her project.

M.I.A.'s postcolonialist cyberpunk mission of VickiLeekx should not have come as a surprise. The rapper began a music leakage project by hosting un-released tracks on one-off websites with provocative domain names, and then sharing the links on Twitter. In explicit terms, she declared her digital mission in explicit terms: "WE GROWIN UP IN MIDDLE OF A DIGITAL RUKUS! THEY CAN TRY TO FUCK US, I AINT PUTTIN ON THE STOPPERS WE GO BE HACKERS.. meds+feds+ in bed !" (_M_I_A_ 2010e). In this tweet, M.I.A. screams, in all caps, to advocate for a cyberpunk revolution among immigrants, refugees, and other subaltern groups that she has shown support for in the past (Powers 2010). M.I.A. dropped the mixtape online making the file downloadable after midnight on January 1, 2011. Ten days after she self-released her mixtape, M.I.A. tweeted a picture of children of South Asian descent (Sri Lankan?) huddling around four desktop computers. She dubbed the image as "!V!I!C!K!I!L!E!E!K!X! STREET TEAM ! 11/1/11" (_M_I_A_ 2011). VickiLeekx has not been M.I.A.'s only cyberpunk project. Earlier last year, M.I.A. set off this leaking rampage by announcing yesthelittlepeoplewillneverwinbuttheycanfuckshitup.com during her North

American tour in September 2010 (_M_I_A_ 2010a). M.I.A. also actively shares news stories about immigration, war crimes, and Sri-Lankan refugees on Twitter. She sometimes couples news story links with web leakage of un-released tracks. Along with a link to a news story about asylum seekers in Australia, M.I.A. announced a newly created website called 4THEPEOPLEONTHEBOAT.com (_M_I_A_ 2010f). The website automatically streams M.I.A.'s song "You Can Have My Money, But You Can't Have Me", and displays 8-bit moving graphics of a suspended spinning globe targeted by four rotating firing guns. In an earlier tweet, M.I.A. explains, "I PUT THIS OUT! I KNOW THE MEDIA GIVES CREDIT TO WHITE DUDES! that white dude playin poker gif is literal" (_M_I_A_ 2010b). With this music video site, I argue, M.I.A. has crystallized a connection between her network music project and her interest in engaging a new digital cultural warfare for "the boat" people.

In a way, the act of leaking a document of national security is similar to immigration, a leakage of citizenry. Both instances challenge the borders of a nation-state. Both are symbolic infractions of the integrity of nation-states. Foregrounding a "leaky" logic, M.I.A. has created an immigrant frontier on the Internet via Vicki Leekx and her other music websites. In this cyberpunk space, the figure of the immigrant is spotlighted. It no longer lives in threat or on fringes of illegality. It lives in comfort, legally and existentially. M.I.A. is the mastermind gamer-architect behind the design of this space between fiction and reality; in it, the immigrant makes up the legitimate citizenry. The Kominas, along with me, and more than 160,000 of her followers on Twitter, happily wander within and around it.

This cyberpunk frontier is unlike the Orientliast one as characterized by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2003). Commenting on cyberpunk fiction and films of the 1980s to 1990s, Chun highlights the dynamics of "high-tech Orientalism" in which an American (white) cowboy enters, through an act of penetration, into a disembodied, virtual space of erotic fantasies of the Orient. High-tech Orientalism enables the cowboy to "erase his body in orgasmic ecstasy...such sexual fantasies and conquest, for this orgasmic ecstasy constructs cyberspace...as a solipsistic space" (2003: 15). Contrarily, M.I.A. is not an "Imperial console cowboy" (2003:18). Playfully and performatively, M.I.A. identifies herself as a post-national immigrant orphan-child while stating a cyberpunk mission to tear down the imperialist structures. For that reason, The Kominas and I both look up to her.

Lisa Nakamura critiques the public discourses that claim the Internet as a borderless space: a terrain in which users, like tourists, can easily consume the culture and image of the distant Other (2002). In this new media terrain, Asians, especially immigrants, are digitally type-casted or "cybertyped" as "exemplary information workers" (2002: 24). I think that Nakamura's reading captures only one part of the story. During my digital field research, I have discovered disparate social spaces on The Internet that are racialized and ethnicized in ways more complex than what Nakamura describes. Maybe this reflects a difference in the time of our research. Nakamura was doing her fielwork in the 1990s; whereas most of my field research was conducted in the mid to late 2000s. Extending from Nakamura's formulation, I argue that there is not one single cyber space, as there are multiple cyber spaces. The Internet is not one giant blob of space. And there are borders and

boundaries—software- and hardware-dependent—that bind and separate these cyber spaces. For instance, I discovered a hard server divide when I was harvesting locale data of the Myspace friends of The Hsu-nami. The "bot" (program) that I wrote "broke" in the process of web-mining. In troubleshooting, I found that Myspace is in fact not as global as it has promised to be. The Myspace user networks of all countries in the world exist in a server located in U.S., with the exception of the users of Myspace China. Hosted by a server in China, Myspace China is institutionally and therefore socially positioned apart from the rest of Myspace networks in "the world." These institutional and social barriers are reinforced by the software barriers between Myspace China and Myspace (U.S.) where The Hsu-nami's page is hosted.[69]

I follow Nakamura's critical race perspective, except that I, as a cybernetic investigator, place my investigative focus on a cultural process, more reparative than hers. I concentrate on the exploration of the alternative terrains and their associated borders reconfigured by individuals of Asian descent. As described in the last section, I have worked, through a set of digital tools, to highlight both global and diasporic diversity, centralizing the perspective of in-between subjectivity of both "hyphenated Americans" and their immigrant friends. What I'm after is not a postracial, but a post-national network built by musicians of various Asian affiliations.

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[69] The software disconnection between China and the United States (and the rest of the world) on Myspace is maybe a product of the financial and political relationship between the countries. In order to follow up this inquiry, one could search news stories about company structure and changes of Myspace. For more detail, read David Barboza's article "Murdoch Is Taking MySpace to China", April 27, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/27/business/worldbusiness/27myspace.html (accessed on January 13, 2011).

Like M.I.A., I'm an immigrant child who relishes in the post-national space proffered by the Internet. Less a rapper/punk-diva figure than M.I.A., I'm a cyberpunk ethnographer. Or better yet, I'm a cyberpunk cartographer working to reconfigure this space however susceptible to sexual fantasy and imperial conquest. In a way, I am working to reorient the existing fantasies and desires projected by imperial and corporate cowboys. I am taking pleasures in navigating within and mapping a world created and occupied by people like me: marked by category of "Asian," "immigrant," or lost somewhere in the cracks between other geographical and social boundaries.

Chapter 5: The Scholar-Performer Emerges:
Reflexive Performance as Public Scholarship

On August 6, 2009, Typhoon Morakot struck the island of Taiwan. The

typhoon triggered mudslides, severe flooding, and the loss of many lives and homes

throughout southern Taiwan. In the wake of typhoon and its aftermath, I witnessed

a tremendous amount of love and support from the Taiwanese American musicians'

community. Susan and Emily Hsu, the front-women of Exit Clov, made a video of

themselves playing and singing 愛拚才會贏 "Ai-Biahnh Jah-eh Eah," a classic pop

song sung in the dialect of Taiwanese. This song was iconic in the Taiwanization

movement led by the members and supports of the Democratic Progressive Party in

the late 1980s and 1990s. The Hsu sisters posted their homebrewed support video

on Youtube and promised to donate 25 cents for every instance of video play on the

website. Within a few hours, they quickly met the goal of reaching 500 hits and

raising the amount as they promised.[70] In addition, musicians and community

organizers combined their efforts to raise funds through benefit concerts. The Hsu-

nami double-billed with Kou Chou Ching, a hip-hop group touring from Taiwan, at a

concert entitled *Spirit of Taiwan* in New York City. The event raised substantial

funds and brought media attention to the disasters in Taiwan.

I was moved by this surge of support for Taiwan generated by the Taiwanese

American community. Using D.I.Y. social media and event organizing, these

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[70] Emily and Susan Hsu quickly met the goal of reaching 500 hits and raising the amount as they promised. The video got circulated in Taiwan and the celebrity singers made a mock performance based on this video. The Taiwanese press presented it as an example of support from the oversees Taiwanese communities. Video link is here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72M9-kyVxsc&feature=player_embedded

Taiwanese American artists reached their audiences across the U.S. and in Taiwan spreading their support for Taiwan. After returning from my trip to see The Hsu-nami's benefit show, I decided to organize a similar event to join the efforts of many in the community across the U.S.. To bring the Charlottesville and the University of Virginia (UVa) communities together for Taiwan, I envisioned a live enactment of "Nakashi", sometimes spelled as "Nakasi" (那卡西), an iconic Taiwanese grassroots style of popular music performance that emerged in the 1930s during the Japanese occupation era on the island. I gathered a number of musician friends from the UVa music department and the local music community to learn a hand-picked selection of surf and garage rock songs from 1960s and 1970s Taiwan and its neighboring countries such as Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, and Cambodia. I also enlisted a number of dancer-friends who choreographed specifically for the performance to complete the theatrical aspects of the Nakashi performance. Joining efforts with the Taiwanese Student Association at UVa and a local Taiwanese café, we raised almost $1000 from the evening's festivities [Figure 5.1]. On a more personal level, this event realized my dream of enacting a Nakashi performance. The event introduced the infectious Nakashi aesthetic of the spectacular in—a down-home Taiwanese style— in a small college town in central Virginia. After the benefit event, we decided to continue to perform, spreading our love for Taiwan and the vintage rock

sounds of Asia.

Figure 5.1: Receipt for Donation for Child Welfare League Foundation in Taiwan raised by Dzian!, with the "People of Charlottesville"

Performing while writing an ethnographic dissertation presents an unusual dissonance. On the one hand, I have immersed myself in the writing of narratives that capture the experiences of my informant-musicians that I came to know during my fieldwork. I have spent countless hours analyzing their music and stories. On the other hand, I'm moved by sound and words generated by this creative bunch of individuals. My experiences of interacting with and learning from these musicians struck me close to home. I too am a musician, and an individual of Taiwanese/Asian descent performing and living in the United States. As I'm writing these

ethnographic narratives, the effects of ethnographic writing have formed a deeper emotional impact on me. But I have been torn about my dual-role as an ethnographer, as someone who bears the (professional) interest and power to represent my informant's experiences, and as someone who seemingly shares a social position and identity with these informer musicians. This tension remains unresolved after four chapters of writing.

Toward the end of writing my dissertation, I shared the pains and gains of dissertation writing with a graduate student colleague, Michael Bishop. He told me he decided to center his ethnography of punk music on his own experiences of playing in GWAR, a renowned metal-punk group that spawned in Richmond in the mid 1980s. When he asked, "have you written about your own experiences?" I had been covering my identity as a musician and as an Asian American individual. Once the elephant in the room had been discovered, I had to understand what has kept me in silence.

I came to participate in the repressed structure of feeling associated with the Asian American sense of loss of social belonging. This state of repression resonates with a melancholic subjectivity embodied by minority individuals, as I have discussed in the introduction chapter. Many of the musician-colleagues that I came to know over the course of my field research have exhibited signs of reluctance in speaking about their experiences. Their refusal, however polite, resonates deeply within me. I too have a hard time talking about what music means to me and how playing music keeps me going in life.

In this last chapter, I speak through this silence by repositioning myself as a musician and performer. I move from the position of an ethnographic listener/observer articulated in the previous chapters, to now highlight my own subjectivity as a performer. Dzian! the band I formed in response to the transnational aid efforts of my informants described above, has become my performative response to the persistent questioning regarding my dissertation by academic and non-academic outsiders: "Is there rock music in Asia?" "Who are the rock musicians of Asian descent?" "Which bands are you talking about?" Alongside my band-mates in Dzian!, I work to inscribe Asia and Asian America into rock music discourses. I intend for this mission to resonate with The Kominas's musical and social engagement to displace the geopolitical center of rock music and of global society at large.

In addition to breaking the silence and claiming a space for Asia and Asian America in local and regional music scenes, my performances with Dzian! have helped me to ameliorate my personal struggle with orientalism and racial melancholia (Eng and Han 2003). Through Dzian!, I have engaged with my dynamic and ambivalent (dis)identification as a Taiwanese American. At the same time performing in Dzian! has offered me opportunities to constructively engage with Asian American loss of a sense of heritage and social belonging.

At the Twisted Branch Tea Bazaar, a local teashop on the downtown mall of Charlottesville, Turkish rugs, Maoist Chinese propaganda posters, hookahs, and Japanese tea sets create an overtly "exotic" space by North American standards. The Tea Bazaar is a prime venue for touring bands to make a stop for a show in central

Virginia. Amps are stacked up on top of each other; merchandise tables display D.I.Y.-made objects to be exchanged for some money to defray the cost of traveling and performing. Some of the hipsters in Bohemian Charlottesville have shown up to see their favorite pan-Asian surf and garage rock band Dzian!. We're blasting Taiwanese A-Go-Go on the tatami *(Japanese straw mat) stage in the front room of the teashop. I put on my red 80s-futurist style sunglasses and a couple of white feather boas around my neck. The glam red accents from these props offset the electric blue disco-style blazer that my mom used to wear in the early 1980s in Taiwan. I ask the crowd, "Do you know what A' Go-Go means?" The crowd answers with a soft "no." I retort with a resounding promise, "It's a sexy dance from Taiwan. And I will show you." With syncopated groove between a cha-cha-cha rhythm and a 4-4 rock drum beat, the band starts playing the introduction of a song entitled "Clothes of Tears." Originally a Japanese pop song in the style of enka, the song was redone in a number of versions in Mandarin Chinese by Taiwanese pop singers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The version that we know best is by Cai Mi Mi. I sing alternating between my throat and head voice, with the attempt to articulate the voluptuous A-Go-Go vocalization. I dance while flailing the feather boas, enacting a vintage Taiwanese diva. Holding the microphone with my right hand, and using my left hand to motion the flow and cadence in the music, I model what I saw on the game shows on Taiwanese television as a child. After the performance, my friend Ali says to me, "my friends loved your performance! One of them said that IT was exactly how she always imagined it."*

I was happy to hear that my performance of an A' Go-Go (阿哥哥) star from 1960s Taiwan was convincing. But what exactly did she mean by the "it"? Is it some

sort of stereotypical fantasy of a performance in a disco bar in somewhere in the remote continent of Asia? In Thailand (which often gets mixed up with Taiwan)? I will never know. It's weird to broach a conversation about ethnic essentialism and Orientlalism, especially at a hookah and alcohol-serving teahouse frequented by white hipsters. The idea that I could possibly reenact the fantasy of Asian exoticism through a musical performance began to irritate me. I thought to myself, how would I address this in performance? When I delved deeper, I realized that I, in fact, do so already.

In performance, I enact a number of archetypes related to the familiar (and unfamiliar) performing personae that I learned from my study of record liner notes, album art, and Youtube videos. I create setlists that move from an A' Go-Go segment featuring a diva-esque vocal performance, to a garage rock portion that delivers Taiwanese nursery rhymes in a raw proto-punk manner. For instance, at the Tea Bazaar, after the voluptuous performance of "Clothes of Tears," we quickly moved into an intense garage rock block that featured our lead guitarist Lanier on an extremely fuzzed out solo. I set off the garage rock portion by singing "Ni Wa Wa," a Taiwanese nursery rhyme about a clay doll that represents an orphaned child. I learned this song as a child and have always loved it. Drawing inspiration from the music by Carol Bui and Kathi Killer, I re-arranged the song, turning a sad song about an orphaned girl into fem-power triumph. In my arrangement, the song begins with a klezmer-influenced rhythm and then transitions into Riot-Grrrl-inspired garage rock song. At the Tea Bazaar, I screamed to assert vocal prowess, while dancing and

batting around the mic stand, evoking James Brown's famous gyrating rock 'n' roll moves.

Oscillating between disparate styles of music and their associated embodiments, I purposefully thwart the audience's expectation for a musical authenticity bound to a specific time and place. The rupture between archetypes, and between the various versions of my performing selves onstage and my offstage persona – as an ordinary graduate student / hipster with dark-framed glasses and skinny jeans in her early thirties – is a key element of play. I foreground this persona rift in my performance by making visible my process of morphing, for example, putting on my feather boas and sunglasses in the middle of set after bantering between songs, and sometimes asking people where my sunglasses are and explaining that "A' Go-Go sounds better if I wear my sunglasses."

This performance strategy of destabilizing fantasies and archetypes is nothing new. The Kominas plays with the discourse of terrorism in its song "Suicide Bomb the Gap" in juxtaposition with Bollywood classics and devotional song "I Will Worship You My Love" (originally by Pakistani qawwali musician Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan). Going back in history, Chinese American vaudeville performer Lee Tung Foo, or Frank Lee deployed a similar strategy. In performance, Lee is noted for slipping in and out of the stereotypical "China man" and Scotsman, and enacting ethnic and racial differences via accent and vocal virtuosity that masters a wide range of songs of various ethnic affiliations. Historian Krystyn Moon argues that Lee's performance reveals the performative nature of race, thus deconstructing racial essentialism via performing (2005).

Issues of gender and sexuality are also at play in my performance. I always wear a pants suit when I perform. In articulating a femme A' Go-Go voluptuousness, I put on the feather boas, bringing in the element of camp. I intentionally juxtapose gendery (Sedgwick 1995) signifiers such as feather boas and gyrating motion, with my more gender-neutral tomboyish suit-clad self underneath the boas. The boas are a result of an inspiration drawn from long hours of close reading of performance sequences in the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, originally for the purpose of writing a scholarly article that I publish during graduate school (Hsu 2007). The cool sunglasses-clad diva image was drawn from the great Asian American female rock diva Yoko Ono in her recent performances with Plastic Ono band. Between songs sometimes, I make utterances to emulate a diva, thanking the audience with a sheepish ultra-femme voice. This gender play relieves some of the anxiety of my being queer in an often intensely heterosexual environment of rock music scenes. Audience members could find themselves shifting their position from rock fans to pop groupies, depending on the gendering of my performance of at the moment.

The performances of Dzian! have also offered a fruitful ground to confront and ameliorate my fraught relationship with my mother. In the introduction chapter, I discussed the Asian American experiences of struggling with the parental pressures related to assimilation. Eng and Han note that immigrants themselves experiences "The losses of cultural comfort and familiarity, national belonging, language, family, social connections" in the process of immigration and over time, these feelings of loss, and the process of mourning can be inherited by the children of these immigrants (2003: 352). My mother's aspiration of having a physician

daughter, as described in the introduction, is a seemingly common desire of many immigrant parents for their children. During my fieldwork, I discovered that this particular parental expectation is, in fact, is a recurring trope among many of my musician-colleagues. We have commiserated over how we have struggled with the inter-generational melancholic manifestation in the sense of guilt, usually articulated as the following in their parents' voices: "We've lost everything to come here to start afresh just so that you will have a better future." Choosing a career path (in the arts) against a stable profession would seem like an act of denial and could sometimes cause relationship severance.

With my new interest in Mandarin songs from 1960s and 1970s Taiwan, I began to approach my mom as a source of knowledge regarding the music of "her time." We have had a number of exchanges about the lyrical content of the songs, while sharing Youtube performances to discuss our stylistic preferences. Since the very first performance of Dzian!, my mom has been a frequent guest performer in the band. In particular, I have asked my mom to perform an A-Go-Go song entitled "Mama Give Me A Guitar" with me. During the performance of this song, my mom and I exchange lines in a call and response, enacting the story depicted in the song lyrics about a young girl pleading her mother to buy her a guitar. The song describes the girl's desire to sing and dance alongside her mother. In performing this song, we enact our performative aspiration for keeping each other company. Through the power of musical performance, we convince not only the audience but also ourselves of our close relationship. The crowd cheers on. We hug each other, both feather boa-clad [Figure 5.2], forging a musical harmony that seeps into our

relationship offstage. And to an extent, I have fulfilled the rock star dream that my

mother probably has always had.

Figure 5.2: The author's band Dzian! with Sonia Hsu, Passport to Taiwan

Finally, beyond the personal, Dzian! has imprinted itself in heritage

communities locally and regionally. The band has performed at several heritage

celebration events organized by various Taiwanese and Chinese American

organizations in Virginia and New York. After performing at the Passport to Taiwan

Festival last summer, on a bill curated by Jack Hsu of The Hsu-nami, Dzian!

impressed the audience in New York. Jack invited us to return to New York to

perform at the Hello! Taiwan Rocks concert at the Taiwan Center [Figure 5.3]. The

Taiwan Center affiliated with the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, is located in

Flushing in the midst of the hustling and bustling of hub of Little Taipei. The center

serves as an activity center for the community. The intention of the performance was to draw a young crowd to the Taiwan Center in order to revitalize the connections between the older, immigrant generation and the younger, often second-generation Taiwanese Americans. We performed second on the list of four bands all with partial Taiwanese American membership. The event brought in a large audience mixed between young Taiwanese Americans and their friends, all in their twenties and thirties; and older Taiwanese immigrants, including members of Taiwan Center. This group also included a group of young Taiwanese nationals who came to New York on a student visa. And a subset of this group were younger Taiwanese national who appeared to be in their late teens, of high-school age, possibly "parachute kids" who are living in the United States without their parents.

We performed a set of songs featuring tunes from Taiwan. Near the end of the set, we played "Ali Shan" (also know as "Gao Shan Qing"), a Taiwanese nursery rhyme about the Native Taiwanese people and the mountainous landscape. Our arrangement was based on a cover version by a 1960s Thai band called Son of Pocket Music. We learned the song from a recording released by Seattle-based indie label Sublime Frequencies. I have included a studio recording of our version of "Ali Shan" [Audio Example 5.1].

We enlivened a song that most people in the audience knew and probably had not heard since they were children. Singing along to the chorus section of the song, the audience members raised their arms above their heads waving to the rhythm of the song. The members of the audience seemed elated by the song. In fact,

the state of elation transcended the various social divides in the audience. Our

performance of this song, iconic of Taiwan, jolted their memories of Taiwan, a sense

of familiarity, nostalgia, or even cultural ownership. It probably allowed them to

access notions of "home" or "Taiwan," however constructed in their minds, based on

their individual relationship to the island. Scott Marcus describes this particular

dynamic as "cultural and personal affirmation" (2008: 209). I will further this point

by pointing out the transformative aspects of this affirmation.

       After the performance, a woman who appeared to be in her late fifties
approached me. Wearing an exhilarated smile on her face, she introduced herself as
a member of the Board of Directors of the Taiwan Center. She thanked me profusely
for performing at the Taiwan Center. She exclaimed, "your music made me love rock
music. I never appreciated rock music before. Your music brought together older
people, young people. I love it! It felt like an explosion!!" She purchased one of our
"Mama Give Me A Guitar" T-shirt with our logo on it and asked to take a picture with
me while posing with the shirt. I thought to myself, maybe rock music never spoke
to her because by convention, it does not represent the experiences of people like
her. I was honored to be involved in creating an aesthetic transformation that
amends her relationship to the musical idiom of rock. Through this performance, I
felt like I achieved the goal of crafting a space for Taiwan and by extension, Asia,
while transforming the aesthetic and ethnic domain of rock music. This
transformation, to me and to my Taiwanese American audience members, provided
an entry into the imaginary terrain of Taiwan and Taiwanese America, a space of

comfort in which we felt like we belonged, at least for the duration of performance.

Figure 5.3: Dzian!, Hello! Taiwan Rocks, Taiwan Center, November 20, 2010. Photograph by Mike Petzinger, courtesy of artist.

Zooming back out to perspective of an academic ethnographer, I consider my band Dzian! a post-fieldwork project of public scholarship: a playground to experiment critically with concepts of race, ethnicity, and postcolonialism formulated in my dissertation. Through writing about my own public music-making, I intend to foreground the role of scholar-performer as one that can thoroughly embody scholarship as a social practice. Via the direct and critical praxis of performance, I engage with the issues of invisibility regarding the Asian and Asian American roots in rock music. I intend for this continuum between ethnography and performance to echo Deborah Wong's advocacy for public intellectual engagement

(2004). In her chapter entitled "Ethnography, Ethnomusicology, and Post-White Theory," Wong argues for the role of musicians and academics as public intellectuals. She cites Edward Said for his formulation of the public identity and responsibility of an intellectual:

> The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy, or opinion to, as well as for, a public… There is no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and publish them you have entered the public world (1994:11; cited by Wong 2004: 303).

Extending from Said, Wong goes on to argue for the role of musicians as public intellectuals. She likens her position as an ethnographer to that of her informant musicians, contending both as public intellectuals working behind in the political project for increasing Asian American visibility and rights. Ultimately she contends for the political viability of her ethnographic work: "an ethnography can enact cultural politics: engaging with one's subjects can occur at the point where strategies for social change are shared" (2004: 318). I admire Wong's efforts in colluding with her musician-informants. But her formulation does not address my situation as a scholar-performer. What happens when the scholar is also a publicly performing agent? I have not found any sufficient answers to this question within existing ethnomusicological literature.

Continuing the cultural work of "undoing fieldwork" by my mentor Michelle Kisliuk (2008), I have reframed the field of my ethnographic examination here to focus on my own experiences as an Asian American performing agent. My goals in

this chapter were to address the practice of public scholarship as a scholar-performer, and to add to the theoretical conversation about critical positionality in ethnography (Kisliuk 1998; Wong 2008). I have offered a set of narratives that illustrate my involvement as a scholar-performer in rock music performance. My work as scholar-performer hopefully completes the feedback cycle where Wong left off. Deborah Wong positions her ethnographic endeavors an as "a consequence of performance" (2004: 5), exemplifying the concept of the "peformative," after J.L. Austin. My reflexive narratives instantiate a reversed motion that positions performance as a consequence of ethnography.

Through these descriptive narratives, I have explained how my performance has acted as post-ethnography cultural work, enacting the social effects of my ethnographic dissertation. I have highlighted moments in my recent performing experiences that generated personal and collective reparation for my anxious and melancholic feelings as an Asian American minority performer in the rock music scenes. Orientalism and melancholia are large structures of feelings and cultural impediments that have loomed over our existence. If the cycle of performing, ethnographic writing, and then back to performing can relieve us from this matrix, let us continue to do so.

Shiver. Glow. Bow.

Appendix: A Technical Note on the Digital Methods

For my digital ethnography project, as described in chapter four, I designed

and executed out a two-phase method. I worked with technologist staff at the

University of Virginia's Scholars' Lab, fortunately, throughout the entire process.

Phase 1 was web-scraping, the process of mining data from the Internet. This

process entails first, locating a source of useful geographic data, and then harvesting

this information programmatically. I was interested in extracting two sets of data,

specifically: the physical location of the band's performance tours; and the self-

reported (physical) location of the friends in an online community. The first set of

data, regarding performance locations, was found on The Kominas's official website.

The information regarding friend locations was found in its most complete form on

the social networking site Myspace.

To extract and process these data sets, I wrote an API (Application

Programming Interface)[71] using Ruby to parse out only the relevant text. During the

period that I was working on this digital project, The Kominas had close to 3,000

friends on Myspace. These were all Myspace users who had requested to become

friends with The Kominas, or vice versa. My API leverage two Ruby gems:

Mechanize[72] and Geokit[73] to complete the task of web-scraping. First, I integrated

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[71] The most complete and up-to-date explanatory document on API is available on *Wikipedia*. Read, "Application programming interface," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Application_programming_interface&oldid=424863947 (accessed on April 19, 2011).

[72] To learn more about Mechanize, visit the official documentation website: http://mechanize.rubyforge.org/mechanize/

[73] To learn more about ruby gem Geokit, visit the official documentation website: http://geokit.rubyforge.org/

Mechanize into the API to act as a web crawler navigating within the environment of Myspace. The API crawled through the web profile pages of all of The Kominas' Myspace space and extracted all the geographically related text from the profile pages of 2,867 friends. See Video Example 1,[74] a webcast to get a sense of the API's web crawling process. Using the Geokit, a Ruby gem that implements the Google Geocoder, the API then translated this information into a set of spatial coordinates, specifically latitude and longitude. Figure A.1 shows the results of the first 47 friends of The Kominas. The first two columns are the latitude and longitude coordinates.

lat	lon	username	location / link	iconSize	iconOffset	icon
39.952335	-75.163789	Sunny Ali & the Kid	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania http://www.myspace.com/249012225	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
41.850033	-87.6500523	Al-Thawra	CHICAGO, Illinois http://www.myspace.com/161456047	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
30.375321	69.345116	Dead Bhuttos	Pakistan http://www.myspace.com/182738567	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
31.54505	74.340683	Noble Drew	LAHORE, Nehr-o-Nehr http://www.myspace.com/399152518	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
22.277493	114.16824	The Fatsumas	starters. http://www.myspace.com/84108530	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
40.7142691	-74.0059729	Michael Muhammad Knight	New York http://www.myspace.com/220205473	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
42.299795	-71.426627	Dankill	Framingham, Massachusetts http://www.myspace.com/19780	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
42.3875968	-71.0994968	Handsome Chuck	somerville, MASSACHUSETTS http://www.myspace.com/24961	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
6.042681	102.1391122	Pompuan_akit_jiwa	Paslr-MaS, KelaNtaN. MY http://www.myspace.com/27249	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
47.162494	19.503304	–Øaphael	Hungary http://www.myspace.com/40317	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
38.893375	-77.022942	Majda	DC Area, Virginia http://www.myspace.com/41488	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
39.7150631	-86.2977342	Andrea Niceschwander	we are a brutal kind... http://www.myspace.com/65716	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
32.802955	-96.769923	Alexis Nicole Pimperton	Dallas, Texas, US http://www.myspace.com/77352	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
26.640628	-81.8723084	Mo-zilla	Ft. Myers, Florida http://www.myspace.com/102945	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
37.8215929	-121.9999606	Osman	Danville, CALIFORNIA http://www.myspace.com/103093	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
39.952335	-75.163789	SassyBritches	philadelphia, Pennsylvania http://www.myspace.com/105998	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
40.7159357	-73.9868057	C(see)Squat	LOWER EAST SIDE, New York http://www.myspace.com/110390	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
42.3492506	-71.0750332	Amit	02116, Massachusetts http://www.myspace.com/122102	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
40.7364911	-73.8779136	Clay N. Ferno	ELMHURST, New York http://www.myspace.com/123247	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
53.4107766	-2.9778383	THRASHGIG	LIVERPOOL http://www.myspace.com/129891	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
34.0522342	-118.2436849	Nahal Bahal	Los Angeles, California http://www.myspace.com/132615	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
-27.46874	-58.80531	Musicians Exchange	RIZATEK http://www.myspace.com/134537	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
36.778261	-119.4179324	Ali Wali	SF BAY AREA/LA/OC, CALIFORNIA http://www.myspace.com/145148 21,25		-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
41.153332	20.168331	Sehej	Albania http://www.myspace.com/146522	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
38.4004674	-122.7144314	Dilluminatti	Santa Rosa, California, US http://www.myspace.com/151660	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
36.778261	-119.4179324	LSS	San Fran (in delhi for a few) , California, US http://www.myspace.com/164464 21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png	
38.9059849	-77.0334179	saracen	dc http://www.myspace.com/191181	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
34.0211224	-118.3964665	Samir	Culver City(L.A.), California http://www.myspace.com/201875	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
34.5008311	-117.1858759	Reshma	Apple Valley, California http://www.myspace.com/221129	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
36.114646	-115.172816	CHRIS MASSES	Las Vegas, Nevada, US http://www.myspace.com/222319	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
40.0583238	-74.4056612	Fuerza Dulce	West Staines Massive, New Jersey http://www.myspace.com/257373 21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png	
39.5500507	-105.7820674	in limbo,	COLORADO http://www.myspace.com/265905	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
38.2541667	-85.7602778	bigthinc.	Louisville, Kentucky http://www.myspace.com/280065	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
37.7141454	-122.25	Miss.Banga	San Francisco-Bay Area http://www.myspace.com/290508	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
41.7858629	-88.1472893	d3z	Naperville, Illinois, US http://www.myspace.com/290767	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
40.7142691	-74.0059729	JuliaGhoulia	NEW YORK http://www.myspace.com/300958	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
38.8951118	-77.0363658	George W	Washington D.C. http://www.myspace.com/306065	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
33.7877944	-117.8531119	Your Singaporean Soldier	Orange, CALIFORNIA http://www.myspace.com/328555	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
53.7608608	-98.8138763	Omar X Kinnarath The Peg	Gritty., Manitoba http://www.myspace.com/330034	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
42.6334247	-71.3161718	jonathan	Lowell, Massachusetts http://www.myspace.com/342176	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
37.826325	-81.142507	Pulin (believes in you)	Veganville, Virginia, US http://www.myspace.com/354312	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
25.7742657	-80.1936589	J	Miami, Florida http://www.myspace.com/359556	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
42.3094288	-71.0854325	Steve Theo	Boston/Cambridge, MASSACHUSETTS http://www.myspace.com/404205 21,25		-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
33.530904	-117.7738916	The Legend of SWITCHBLAA	liso Viejo (1503), California, US http://www.myspace.com/40687	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
34.0423446	-118.3461948	KillRadio.org	Non-Corporate Media From the Heart of Los Angeles http://www.myspace.com/407004	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/
42.6055893	-83.1499304	Reena Evita	Troy, MICHIGAN http://www.myspace.com/413644	21,25	-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png
41.9028099	-87.7208896	bradley	Humboldt Park, Chicago, Illinois http://www.myspace.com/434741 21,25		-10,-25	http://www.openlayers.org/dev/img/marker.png

Figure A.1: Table containing a sample of the extracted data from Myspace (47 friends)

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[74] Video Example 1 is hosted on my blog along with the audio examples used throughout the dissertation. Visit link: http://beingwendyhsu.info/?p=612. Password is: "melancholia".

Phase 2 - geospatial visualization – was the process of turning the harvested data into a meaningful visualization. Using OpenLayers,[75] an open-source web mapping resource based on JavaScript, I created a dynamic map containing all the points of the physical locations of the band's Myspace friends and performance tours [Figurer A.2]. To contextualize the reading of the physical points, I added various map layers. I added a Google street map layer to label the visualization with the proper name of countries and cities. I added a layer that indicated the various regions of the world [Figure A.3]. To better see the area concentration of friends, I turned the points into clusters [Figure A.4]. I used an algorithm that balances point density and readability, so that the contrast between the smallest and the largest clusters is adjusted. In this case, a single-point cluster could still be seen and the largest concentration of the friends of the northeast of the United States would not dominate the entire map.

After the completion of these steps, I spent the rest of my efforts on exploring geospatial patterns within this dynamic visualization and then finding meanings in these patterns within the relevant ethnographic and critical contexts of my dissertation.
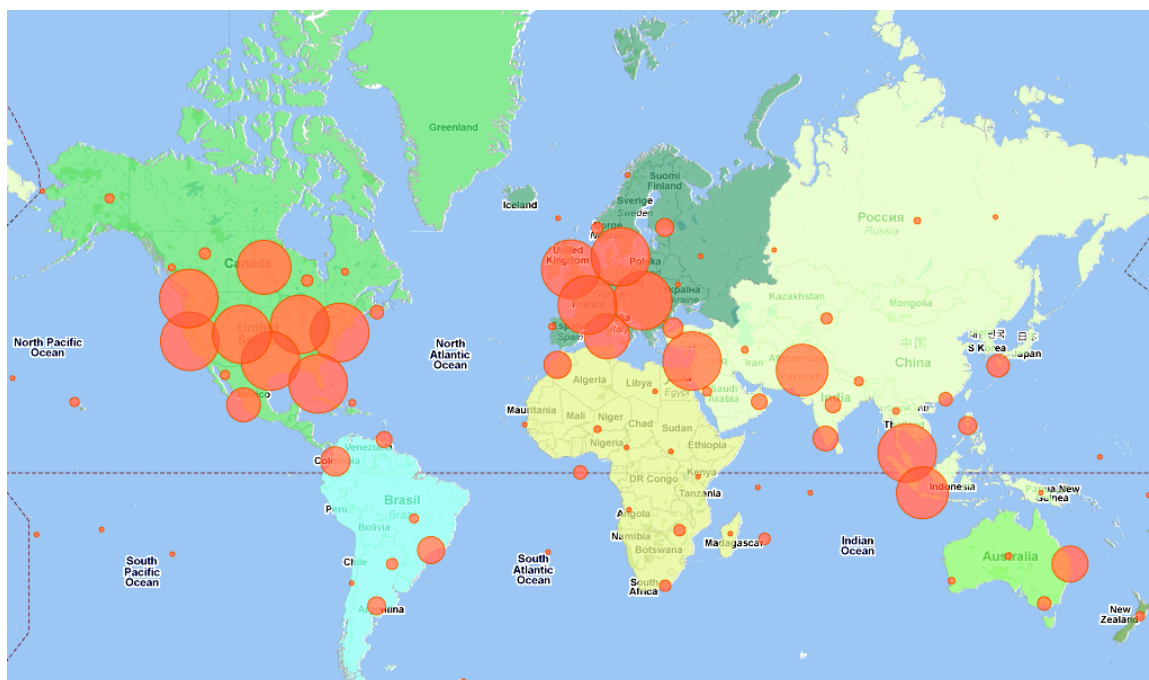
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[75] To learn more about web mapping program OpenLayers, visit the official website: http://openlayers.org/ and read the *Wikipedia* article, "OpenLayers," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=OpenLayers&oldid=410057518 (accessed January 25, 2011).

Figure A.2: A Preliminary Visualization

Figure A.3: Visualization with A Continent Layer

Figure A.4: Visualization with Cluster Patterns

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