

An Autoethnographic Approach to Composing Japanese American Music

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Introduction

When I say “Asian American music,” I usually get the impression that people do not have much of a sense of what that means, regardless of if they are Asian Americans,¹ musicians, or both. Yet, I have found that there is no straightforward answer to the question of how exactly to define Asian American music. It could be defined in terms of Asian American people, Asian American meaning, Asian American sounds, or some combination of those factors. Considering and exploring several definitions of Asian American music, I present here one possible conception of Japanese American/Asian American music in fundamentally integrated theory and practice.

The basic premise of this integration is autoethnography, or the study of oneself or one’s own group. As I read existing literature on Asian American music and classical Japanese music, I wrote a series of autoethnographic reflections, connecting the scholarship to my own personal experiences of being a mixed second generation Japanese American from small town Ohio. I then used these reflections to compose, perform, and record three pieces of music

that engage the theoretical concepts I encountered in specific and intentional ways. In addition to this Asian American content of the compositions, I created Asian American form by drawing on the music of the shakuhachi (Japanese vertical bamboo flute). The body of this paper comprises description of and commentary on the compositions and the ideas with which they interact.

Although the weaving together of theoretical prose and auto-ethnographic creative work often centers on the surface level my experiences as an individual, it is crucial to note that the purpose of such work is to illuminate larger cultural, social, and/or political issues. Asians in America have long faced racist stereotypes and violence, portrayed as “perpetual foreigners” ruining the country in one way or another. I see distinctly Asian American cultural production as one way to counter such harmful societal perceptions. To that end, I weave creative work through academic theory at a fundamental level in order to give readers a window into experiences that may be very different from their own. Therefore, I present this study as a historically and culturally informed synthesis of academic research and original music.

Literature Review

In existing scholarship on Asian American music (making), authors take opposing stances on whether or not Asian American music necessarily involves Asian American people, Asian American meaning, and/or Asian American sounds. I bring literature on the shakuhachi into the conversation as an example of one possible direct connection to Asian cultural sounds in the creation of a Japanese American/Asian American musical style.

The broadest definitions of Asian American music do not require sonic connections to Asian music, Asian American creators,

or even explicit Asian American meaning. Although Lam (1999) does not list straightforward defining properties, his examples go as far as to include “Chop Suey,” a song by European Americans Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, and Korean American Earl Kim’s completely “European classical” sounding violin concerto. Wang (2001) builds upon Lam’s study, focusing on Asian American popular music and maintaining that generalizations and definitions cannot neatly be made regarding textual or aesthetic requirements for something to be Asian American music. In defining Asian American music, Lam and Wang focus on either Asian American meaning explicit in the music or their own interpretations of Asian American meaning based on the identities of the musicians. While they do mention music that draws from traditional Asian forms, they certainly do not consider that trait to be a requirement of Asian American music.

Contrarily, others require all three elements—Asian American people, meaning, and sounds—in their definitions of Asian American music. In defining Japanese American music, Asai (1995) includes sounds from Japanese traditional music, primarily Japanese American creators, and Asian American political consciousness. Ho (1999) similarly contends that Asian American music is more than just anything created by someone who is Asian in America—it must relate to both Asian American experiences and traditional Asian music. Fred Ho further advocated for “a radical unity of form and content” over “multicultural fusion confusion,”² or in other words, a deep, meaning-driven synthesis rather than a superficial pastiche of musical elements from different cultures.

For the “American” side of Asian American music, many practitioners have drawn influence from Black American music.³ Wong (2004) and Asai (2005) specifically focus on these Afro-Asian musical solidarities, and such musical trends parallel the way Asian American social movements have often taken inspiration from Af-

rican American ones. Therefore, I express an Asian American musical sensibility by combining my personal experiences as an Asian American, my background playing Black American music, and my study of Asian music. The literature on the shakuhachi is one body of knowledge that could support multiple compelling methods of synthesis.

With the goal of composing Asian American music in mind, two contrasting approaches for analyzing shakuhachi music become evident. While Weisgarber (1968), Berger (1969), and Simon (2017) show varying degrees of cultural awareness, they all analyze *honkyoku* (本曲, “original pieces,” classical solo repertoire of the shakuhachi) primarily in terms of properties such as pitch/mode, motifs, rhythm, and form. Although these properties are central to Western music, they were secondary or inconsequential in the minds of the original Japanese practitioners of *honkyoku* according to Burnett (1989) and Bellando and Deschênes (2020). Bellando and Deschênes specifically argue for the analysis of shakuhachi tone color as one of the foremost musical properties in the music’s original cultural context. Matsunobu (2013) and Browning (2016) take similarly cultural stances on more modern contexts, focusing on elements of nature and environments as they play into the increasingly globalized network surrounding the shakuhachi today. Matsunobu (2014) examines how timing, aesthetics, and practices of shakuhachi music parallel cultural positioning in areas of life such as firework shows and interviews in Japanese and North American contexts.

While understanding these historical and modern cultural surroundings of the shakuhachi certainly has a critical bearing on my creation of new music of Asian America, an understanding of diasporic culture is another important factor. Esaki (2017) expresses Japanese American aesthetic and artistic values, explaining how ambiguity and silence reflect Japanese American history and are

sometimes more politically effective in artistic application than clarity and explicitness. These aesthetics connect directly to many of the ones mentioned in works on the shakuhachi, rounding out a multi-disciplinary body of literature that can inform one possible conception of Japanese American/Asian American music composition.

However, while literature on the shakuhachi is often written by scholar-practitioners, literature on Asian American music is often written by researchers about musicians. In the few cases where the author is the musician being discussed, such as Fred Ho, the writing is largely retrospective and descriptive. I offer this paper as an example of concurrent research and composition of shakuhachi-based Japanese American music.

Autoethnography and Positionality

Since I have created the music below from experiences of mine that I consider Japanese American/Asian American, it is important to note my positionality as an individual, as no clean lines of inclusion or exclusion can be drawn or labels applied regarding what exact experience I am speaking to other than my own. However, many of my experiences are shared amongst large groups of people, as is the purpose of autoethnography. The more autoethnographers challenge the researcher-researched binary, the more “insiders are both anyone and everyone, and the field is everywhere and nowhere” due to a “non-unitary notion of self” or an “amplified sense of multiple selves.”⁴ This means that even though the present academic and creative products may seem to be about me on a surface level, references to my personal experiences are meant to illustrate larger issues. Therefore, I will state facts of my personal positionality that are relevant to understanding the compositions in this project.

Two important factors are parentage and community. One term that could be used to describe me is *hāfu* (ハーフ, “half”), which means someone of mixed Japanese and non-Japanese parentage. Some people reject this term, saying they are not half of anything, but rather fully connected to both sides of their heritage. This goes far beyond anything specifically Japanese/Asian, and is a common theme in discussions on mixed identity. I grew up in small town Ohio without the opportunity to connect with communities in Asia or Asian America, so I would not consider myself someone who rejects the *hāfu* label on the basis of feeling one hundred percent of both sides. Further, due to rather arbitrary factors of physical appearance, I think most of my experiences of being racialized growing up would not have been that different if I was fully Japanese or anything else vaguely East Asian. Therefore, I have uncertain relationships with mixed identity and Japanese-ness, and the resultant experiences I creatively draw upon are largely my own as opposed to those of a childhood community.

The issue of individual experiences versus community experiences relates to another important factor, generation. Another term that could be used to describe me is *shin-nisei* (新二世, “new second generation”). This means a person of Japanese ancestry who is the first generation born outside of Japan to parents (or a parent) who emigrated from Japan after World War II. Therefore, I have no familial connection to the World War II-era incarceration of Japanese Americans, which is often the central topic in Japanese American social justice groups and political art.⁵

With this positionality in mind, it follows that my musical practice within Asian American artistic expression (at the time of writing) does not come primarily from a place of familial or community traditions. It is instead driven by a deepening awareness of overarching societal issues as they relate to my individual experiences and “ethnic well-being.”⁶ For example, shakuhachi

playing is not something passed down through my family or any larger Japanese American communities (as far as I can tell from my non-experiential knowledge of them). Rather, I use learning the shakuhachi tradition as an embodiment of ethnic pride in the face of assimilation-pushing racism, and I use creative exploration based on that tradition as a site for the production of culture that resists the perpetual foreigner stereotype.

In this project, this autoethnographic cultural production takes the form of three musical compositions. These works sprung from autoethnographic reflections I wrote in response to literatures on primarily Asian American music and classical Japanese music, forming a middle step of my methodology between interacting with my sources and creating my products. Spry describes a good autoethnography as “not simply a confessional tale of self-renewal; it is a provocative weave of story and theory” that moves the reader both emotionally and critically.⁷ Accordingly, each of the following three sections comprises theoretical and explanatory prose followed by a link to a recording of the composition being discussed and various visual materials that describe my creative meanings in more specific detail.

Composition 1 of 3: “On Childhoods Colored by Sanguine Blues”

“On Childhoods Colored by Sanguine Blues” responds to the ideas Esaki expresses on ambiguity and silence in Japanese American experiences and art.⁸ Considering Japanese American history, common phrases like *shikata ga nai* (仕方がない, “it can’t be helped”) and *Namu Amida Butsu* (南無阿弥陀仏, “save me, Amida Buddha”) can be interpreted to be advocating for an acceptance of life’s ambiguity.⁹ However, when literal and metaphorical silences arise from this acceptance, they are not simply absences of

sound or expression. Rather, they create “a deep, resonant, and productive state of silence.”¹⁰ I consider this a direct manifestation of the Japanese aesthetic concept of *ma* (間), which is usually translated as negative space, interval, silence, etc. *Ma* is also often a prominent consideration in classical Japanese music,¹¹ Japanese American music,¹² and “Asian American jazz-based music.”¹³ As Matsunobu posits, acutely felt *ma* or lack thereof in areas of life as diverse as shakuhachi playing, firework shows, and interviews deeply reflects cultural positioning.¹⁴

Therefore, *ma* in the recording of “On Childhoods Colored by Sanguine Blues” was a primary avenue of the expression of this piece’s emotional content (which I explain in greater detail below). As Matsunobu argues, “demonstrated through the concept of *ma*, the aesthetic mode of connection is tied into how people talk and listen. To know the former is to know the latter.”¹⁵ Matsunobu’s angle is about the bearing aesthetic principles such as *ma* can have on understanding cultural elements of conversation and connection, but the reverse can also be true, as I demonstrate here. The premise explored in the performance linked below was that friend and musical collaborator Akira Di Sandro and I would consecutively have the same conversation verbally and musically. The verbal version of the conversation would inform improvised musical elements such as *ma* when we recorded the musical version of the conversation. I emphasize the element of friendship because I feel that our numerous previous conversations free from intentionally direct musical application positively impacted our ability to suspend *ma* between us meaningfully.

That ability was amplified by the diasporic evolution of *ma* beyond its original definition in traditional Japanese aesthetics. Since *ma* pervades culture outside the bounds of the arts, subtleties in the timing and placement of speech, movements, and musical gestures can serve as intangible manifestations of ethnic heritage.

This may then serve as a point of connection between individuals with shared backgrounds. Although such connections are almost certainly immeasurable and unnoticed in day-to-day interactions, “On Childhoods Colored by Sanguine Blues” is an experiment in the intentional and explicit application of this sensitivity through music.

In addition to the more easily compared presence or absence of *ma* in spoken and musical conversation, a less concrete determining factor of the *ma* in the recording below was the content of the conversation—topics of personal experiences of culture and identity. While I do see merit in general emotional connection through simply playing music together without trying to imbue it with emotions from specific life experiences, I think that music created to convey certain messages has a lot to gain if the musicians emotionally connect with each other in nonmusical ways as well. A more appropriate term than nonmusical for this situation might be non-recorded—I consider our spoken conversation an essential part of this approach to making music. Therefore, actual rhythms of speech, emotional connection specific to this situation, and more general emotional connection impacted our performance. As a composer, I aimed to provide enough grounding and predetermination to make the emotional aspects relate to Esaki’s ideas of ambiguity and silence while still leaving enough room for the moment’s conversation to spontaneously shine through and be heard.

Before going into great detail about the elements of the semi-predetermined emotional content of this piece, I must first address the irony of explaining my ambiguities and silences. Esaki gives the following examples of Japanese American silences: “hiding in plain sight, sensing others’ presence, creating a zone of respect, an intense mental focus, recognizing the recurrence of cycles of time, and remembering the lessons of trauma.”¹⁶ Considering how those items might be manifested in art, they already seem quite ambig-

uous in and of themselves. I may or may not have done all or none of them in this piece, but intentional ambiguity also has a place in Japanese American creative expression.

It is of key importance to note that refusing to be overly explicit about the political meanings of one's art in the pieces themselves or in written or spoken explanations can be an effective form of resistance. In political art such as the pieces I am creating in this project, "when the political message is too well understood, a general American audience may reject the entirety of the art," but if the message takes a more abstract form, "an observer—not rejecting it offhand—may spend an additional amount of time to contemplate the piece, then may feel the silences of turmoil, and then may be inspired to empathize."¹⁷ While the following commentary may stifle the effectiveness of any potential ambiguity, the purpose of the current study is more to examine and share the formation of a process than it is to create products with maximum effectiveness, so I think it serves a better purpose included than not.

I will begin with the title, "On Childhoods Colored by Sanguine Blues." "On" is there to emphasize the fact that the music is a discussion, and "Childhoods" is there to highlight the early age at which significant parts of identity form. The rest of the title relates to "holy amphiboly," a term coined by Japanese American theologian Fumitaka Matsuoka that Esaki uses to describe the ambiguous messages in our lives and "the spiritual orientation of perpetual ambiguity."¹⁸ I aimed to create a sort of grammatical amphiboly with "Colored by Sanguine Blues." It can mean both something to the effect of "tinted by red blues," a literal reference to colors found on the American and Japanese flags, and something to the effect of "influenced by optimistic melancholia," a reference to holy amphiboly itself as well as strong silences such as *ma* and *gaman*. *Gaman* (我慢) in this sense means perseverance, patience, tolerance, self-restraint, etc. and is used in English to describe spe-

cifically Japanese/Japanese American manifestations of those characteristics.

A primary structural and gestural element of this composition is the blues. Esaki describes the music from a Deborah Wong anecdote about some of Francis Wong and Glenn Horiuchi's more abstract expressions of holy amphiboly as evoking a multilayered blues emotion, drawing "upon spiritual resources of Asian American and African American religions and political movements."¹⁹ As I hope I have made musically evident, similarities between musics of Asian heritage such as *honkyoku* and musics of African heritage such as the blues support arguments for Afro-Asian solidarity. One example of parallel characteristics I have noticed is the shaping of bent notes. I demonstrate this parallel in my shakuhachi playing on the recording of "On Childhoods Colored by Sanguine Blues" during the section labeled "2" in the table below. Furthermore, one might go as far as to describe the lowered seventh on the tonic chord in the blues as having holy amphiboly because of the feeling of ambiguity and unresolved harmonic tension it creates. My intention to demonstrate these ideas can be seen in the musical and poetic phrases, which take on blues forms. For example, they feature elements such as call- and-response phrases in sets of six pairs, microtonal inflections, implicit blues chord progressions, blues-influenced beats and breaks, and idiomatic text structures.

In addition to the predominantly blues-based stanzas of the poem, the content is also directly related to the topics at hand. See the poem below and the subsequent table for what I am referencing with each stanza and the corresponding musical sections as the video shows.



LINK TO RECORDING:

<https://youtu.be/NbY2AkpSBts>

stanza	what I am referencing
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • music that comes from silence as opposed to a constant beat being heard • Esaki’s various silence types as discussed above • the relevance of most things in life to culture and identity—meaning I would not consider any parts of the spoken and musical conversations in this piece to be tangents
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • harmonies that change based on semi-improvised melodic phrases as opposed to being a predetermined number of beats long, such as in the work of Blind Lemon Jefferson • progress through solidarity • self-determination, in the way AIR (Asian Improv aRts) was influenced by the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians)²⁰
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • musical breaks • intentionally broken systems/institutional racism • the colors of the American flag • sadness becoming anger and anger becoming sadness • common laundry phrase • “whitewashing” of cultures, media representations, people like me, etc.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sudden anger at the topics addressed in the previous stanza • the repackaging of that anger into a form of silence, one that contains the same energy and power but might be less likely to be immediately dismissed by listeners
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening to people’s stories, even when they appear “silent” at first • literal and metaphorical silence increasing as literal and metaphorical sound decreases • <i>gaman</i> as discussed above, seemingly getting weaker in the music and poetry, but actually getting stronger if interpreted as a form of strong silence

Reflecting on making music of this nature, there are both advantages and disadvantages. Compositions like this one that specifically reference Japanese American experiences are potentially meaningful to anyone regardless of ethnicity, probably at least partially relatable to non-Japanese Asian Americans, and valuable even if they do end up only serving Japanese Americans. However, the history of Asian American music and Asian America must be taken into account. Many historical figures in Asian American music and activism (and activist music) whose voices are given prominence are Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. They seemingly serve as representatives of the great deal of heterogeneity under the term “Asian American,” but this may sometimes be at the expense of communities such as South Asian Americans and

Southeast Asian Americans. Therefore, as a Japanese American claiming to compose Asian American music, this is a concern I must not take lightly. Beyond the scope of this project, a possible direction regarding this topic would be involving more collaborators with other musical backgrounds and personal experiences. Within what was possible in this project, I address some of these issues in the second composition.

Composition 2 of 3: “Spill Your Guts”

“Spill Your Guts”²¹ is about family and issues of pan-Asian solidarity and is the composition out of the three in this project that has the broadest musical influences outside of *honkyoku*. It primarily responds to Henry Burnett’s analysis of Minezaki Kōtō’s chamber piece *Zangetsu*²² and considerations of Asian American music not having to sound like traditional Asian music based on the ideas of Joseph Lam²³ and Oliver Wang.²⁴

Burnett’s article made me reconsider approaches to analyzing and composing from classical Japanese music. Burnett provides a detailed analysis of musical elements such as form, modes, pitch collections, leading tones, string tunings, text, centonization, and the rhythm of the parts in heterophony. Analyses of *honkyoku* by Weisgarber,²⁵ Berger,²⁶ and Simon²⁷ also focus on properties such as pitch/mode, motifs, rhythm, and form. I do not mean to entirely discount Western music theory analyses upon Eastern musical traditions. Nevertheless, an approach more rooted in Japanese cultural conceptions of music is more in line with the radical form and radical content cooperation I am searching for in order to compose Asian American music. Burnett asserts that in Japanese chamber music, the “kaleidoscope of tone colors” is in many respects “even more significant than the composition itself” and that “elements of formal composition considered to be of structural significance in

the West—e.g. systematic repetition, harmonic coherency, large-scale recapitulation—are of secondary importance in this repertoire.”²⁸ In addition, he admits that “for the benefit of Western readers the present analysis has concentrated on modal voice leading, motivic variation, and rhythmic construction within the general framework of the *jo-ha-kyū* aesthetic. However, the reader should not be misled into thinking that these compositional concerns hold much meaning for the Japanese performer.”²⁹ *Jo-ha-kyū* (序破急) is a concept governing many Japanese arts that roughly means “slow [beginning], breaking [development], rapid [conclusion]”³⁰ or “introduction, exposition, denouement.”³¹ Consequently, I used this claim by Burnett as I composed “Spill Your Guts” to carefully consider which musical elements from *Zangetsu* to use.

While I had initially considered composing something that was closer to *Zangetsu* in its basic levels of musical sound, I eventually decided to take more subtle influences in order to avoid sounding like orientalized stereotypes. In addition to the Western instruments used in my composition, the musicians playing them had little or no deep immersion in classical Japanese music. Attempting to sound exactly like *Zangetsu* would have resulted in unproductive oversimplification of the values of Japanese chamber music. A second reason is that sounding accurately and authentically like classical Japanese music is not my compositional goal because that would not reflect the hybrid identities of Asians in America as directly as I would like.

Accordingly, the more subtle influences are as follows:³² The instrumentation of “Spill Your Guts” is inspired by that of *Zangetsu*. My instrumentation of guitar, bass, saxophone, and voice corresponds to the common chamber ensemble instrumentation of koto, sangan (shamisen), shakuhachi, and voice that Minezaki uses in that they both comprise two string instruments, a woodwind in-

strument, and voice. In the intro and outro sections, I took ideas from Burnett's analysis to employ elements of a Japanese mode known as *in-sempo*³³ and "a complex texture that might be called contrapuntal heterophony," or variations on a single theme played at the same time.³⁴ However, I intended to transform those musical concepts enough that the music does not appear to be trying to accurately resemble Japanese music but is still ideologically based in concepts from it. This parallels the way some diasporic Asian communities have developed cultural identities of their own that are not always exactly like those of their original source. While the verse, chorus, and solo sections of "Spill Your Guts" do have some elements based on *Zangetsu*, such as my intentionally inexact doubling of the vocal melody on saxophone in the second verse, the primary body of knowledge I synthesized in those sections was that of Asian American music that sonically falls more into pop and folk veins.

The middle sections of this composition respond to Joseph Lam's opinions on the use of the term "Asian American music"³⁵ and Oliver Wang's chronicle of Asian American popular music.³⁶ They were also largely influenced by the American acoustic folk-inspired music heard on Yellow Pearl's *A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle by Asians in America*³⁷ and No-No Boy's *1942*³⁸ and *1975*.³⁹ Before reading Lam and Wang's articles, I had a loose idea of Asian American music as music by Asian Americans that uses elements from Asian forms of music to address Asian American issues. While I hesitate to define Asian American music in any absolute and exclusive way, these articles helped me expand my general view of it. I still would have said Yellow Pearl and No-No Boy were Asian American music before this project, but they seemed far from the instrumental *honkyoku*-related music I was working on. Through this composition, I was able to expand my view of what I can possibly create to include music that is Asian American

primarily in lyrical content.

The basic premise of my lyrical content is that it takes my experience with connection to different sides of the family that have different cultural backgrounds and relates that to the need to have pan-Asian solidarity without erasing people's unique experiences. The first verse is about family, and the second verse is about issues of pan-Asian solidarity. The chorus is about either and both, contextualized differently depending on which verse precedes it. The poem in Japanese at the end is also about either and both of these issues, stylistically taking influence from the text of *Zangetsu*.⁴⁰ My idea to include these words as a kind of postscript came from the *haibun* (俳文), a Japanese literary form composed of a prose poem followed by a haiku. Be that as it may, I do not claim to have created anything authentic by any set of traditional Japanese rules. This is in the same way that I would not want to compose music that sounds exactly like *Zangetsu*. I feel that reinterpretations from a Japanese American perspective more authentically reflect my emotional and lyrical meaning. See the following tables for what I am referencing with all the lyrics of this composition and their corresponding music.



LINK TO RECORDING:

<https://youtu.be/bO61kgUIKTs>

lyrics	what I am referencing
verse 1	
<p>maybe when you're older / you won't think of that day / that time when you were small I made you cry</p> <p>as the nights get colder / sleep may seem far away / remember to recall this lullaby</p> <p>the clouds above you / say that I love you / waning wisps of days that I'm not in</p> <p>the swing gets slower / soon spring is over / moments fade like tunes long forgotten</p>	<p>As I mentioned in endnote 21, this section of the lyrics for the most part came from a previous composition I performed instrumentally called "Forgotten Lullaby/Omoidasenai Komoriuta." The concept of the lullaby represents connection with family, especially older generations. On a personal level, this relates to the metaphorical "lullabies" that will be forgotten because I didn't grow up around any family other than my parents. Going beyond my family, this relates to the metaphorical "lullabies" that will be forgotten due to the targeting of elders in the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans.</p>
verse 2	
I know that your life's been / far from places I've known / a couple thousand miles and that's not all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the great diversity within Asian American experiences, one significant factor being location—for example, the couple thousand miles between rural Ohio and urban California the fact that I will never experientially understand the vast majority of Asian American experiences
moments that reside in / lives we had long ago / accumulate in piles we can't recall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the extent to which Asian Americans do have shared histories or adjacently relatable histories how those histories are mostly not taught in schools
in stormy weather / let's play together / but the game's more mahjong than chess set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the need to have strength in numbers without losing sight of our very different experiences black and white and chess pieces and more complicated categories in mahjong—I am saying that this is not a black and white situation, but rather an extremely nuanced situation with dynamics of privilege even amongst communities that work together for collective liberation
so I endeavor / to write this letter / to a friend I just haven't met yet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> placement of the "you" in some of these lyrics, which generally references Asian Americans with very different experiences from mine

chorus		
lyrics	what I am referencing in relation to the meaning of verse 1	what I am referencing in relation to the meaning of verse 2
when I see your face in the mirror / I wonder if you see mine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> issues of mixed identity, meaning wondering if either side of my family sees me in themselves/themselves in me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> seeing myself in other Asian Americans with different experiences from mine and wondering if they also see themselves in me (for example, how much I feel like I relate to Ganavya's music⁴¹) recognizing that this is likely caused by a combination of external racism and internal hopes for solidarity

maybe my words could have been a bit clearer / maybe I could have made more time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> regret and recognition of my own faults and ways I possibly could have done better in the past with both of these groups of people
we might never see more than a smile / even if we could talk for a while	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> following from the previous point, the fact that while a few simple conversations would be better than nothing, what is needed for true understanding is deeper emotional connection that is not always directly about being family or being Asian American (seeing more than a smile meaning seeing someone's deeper emotions)
if I say that I'm 泣いている (crying) / I know that might not mean much to you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> non-Japanese family members who might not understand if said I was crying in Japanese, which is true in a literal sense but also serves as a metaphor for expressing sadness about the racism I have faced non-Japanese Asian Americans who might not understand if said I was crying in Japanese, which is true in a literal sense but also serves as a metaphor for expressing sadness about issues that are more specifically Japanese American
but if I went and spilled all my guts / on a late night TV show	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the need for more cultural sensitivity than humorously framing the cuisines of unfamiliar cultures as gross to large audiences for profit⁴²
maybe we'd find a spark to discuss / and you'd count me as someone you know	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the theme in Asian American artistic expression of public displays of art being an indirect path to emotional connection with family (spilling one's guts on a late night TV show representing being emotionally open in a public way) similarly to the point to the left, that public emotional expression also being a pathway to connection with other Asian Americans

poem text	nonliteral translation	what I am referencing in relation to the meaning of verse 1	what I am referencing in relation to the meaning of verse 2
望みの夢 / 見なさい / 鶴の鳴き声 / 世界中に聞こえるなら / 旅が無用	Hope! Dream! If the crane's cry could be heard throughout the world, these journeys would be unnecessary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the crane as a symbol of Japanese-ness my inability from small town Ohio to connect with that part of me and my family the need to keep imagining further and going on these creative and academic journeys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the crane as a symbol of Japanese-ness the inability of more specifically Japanese American work to fully represent people from many different backgrounds the need to keep imagining further and going on these creative and academic journeys

The third meaning of the poem that does not line up with either of the verses uses the crane's cry as a metaphor for nature crying out in the face of climate change. Stopping the destruction of crane populations and nature more generally is another journey necessary throughout the world. Accordingly, the third composition connects this issue with discussions of culture and shakuhachi music. This might at first seem like a departure from directly Asian American issues, but I think it is very relevant with a consideration of Diane Fujino's statement on Fred Ho that "Music, as one form of cultural expression, is an important medium for resisting the oppressor's symbolism and for decolonizing one's mind."⁴³ With the third composition, I aimed to connect to this concept of decolonizing the mind by reexamining human relationships with nature through the lens of culture related to the shakuhachi.⁴⁴

Composition 3 of 3: "Medi(t)ation in the Coolest Summer for the Rest of Our Lives"

"Medi(t)ation in the Coolest Summer for the Rest of Our Lives" expands upon the conversation about the hierarchies of musical elements in different cultures by extending it to nonhuman creators of music. It draws parallels between the hegemony of Eurocentric conceptions of music over those of other cultures and the hegemony of human expression and existence over that of nature. One of the primary messages of this composition is similar to that of Nobuko Miyamoto's "What Time Is It on the Clock of the World?,"⁴⁵ but in addition to placing such a message in the content, I aimed to create a form that would critique dichotomies of nature versus culture and culture versus culture.

This Western culture versus Eastern culture discussion is in response to the ideas on shakuhachi tone color expressed by Nick

Bellando and Bruno Deschênes.⁴⁶ They argue that *honkyoku* should be “understood as ‘tone-colour melodies,’ and both played and heard from the perspective of embodiment rather than mental analysis.”⁴⁷ This means that the composer’s ideas are not expressed primarily through a pitch-based melody, as is a central feature of Western music, but rather a series of timbres. They assert that the original practitioners focused on the physicality of the breath, fingers, and spirit within the cultural meaning of tone colors contextualized in natural and social environments, while melody, harmony, rhythm, and even consistent pitch were secondary or nonexistent concerns.⁴⁸ Because these differences are crucial to understanding different musical cultures, my intention with this composition is to question one-to-one comparisons between musical forms of different backgrounds. In order to make my form embody that content, I composed a melody based on tone color rather than pitch by creating a system of symbols that correspond to timbral techniques. I especially drew from philosophies like *ichion jōbutsu* (一音成仏, “enlightenment in one single tone”), a concept I interpret to be advocating for greater recognition of the great deal of music that can be found in a single note (as opposed to such focus on complicated systems of combining notes). The following table shows the system I created, which can be seen in application in the video and the score.

symbol	technique/ timbre name	rough description ⁴⁹
▼	atari	finger articulation
↔	hira-yuri	vibrato achieved by sliding the lips side to side
»»	korokoro	microtonal/timbral trill
○	ma	see the discussion of <i>ma</i> in the section headed “Composition 1 of 3”
◦	mawashi-yuri	vibrato achieved by rotating the head
≡	muraiki	a kind of breathy blast
~	nayashi	pitch bend, usually using the head
㊦	neiro	not an actual named shakuhachi technique, rather a reference to stark differences in tone color between different pitches on the shakuhachi, something that would often be considered undesirable in Western music
↵	tamane	flutter tonguing, or sometimes a similar sound produced with the throat
→	tsuki-yuri	vibrato achieved by pressing the shakuhachi against the lips
⊕	unshi	not an actual named shakuhachi technique, rather a reference to alternate fingerings that produce more or less the same pitch with different tone colors

The second topic of this composition, a discussion of nature versus culture, is in response to Koji Matsunobu’s study on “self-integration”⁵⁰ and Joseph Browning’s study on shakuhachi recordings.⁵¹ Matsunobu uses the experiences of shakuhachi players to challenge the nature- culture dichotomy through his ideas on “self-integration.” Self-integration “embraces nature as part of music and aims to create harmony between the process of music making and that of nature experience... used as an antithesis of the prevalent idealization of ‘self-expression’ in arts education that places emphasis on product-oriented activities and overlooks the interaction between the individual and the environment.”⁵² Complementarily, Browning examines the ways in which nature imagery and landscapes hold meaning in recordings produced in the global shakuhachi scene, primarily through albums that include sounds created by nonhuman sources.⁵³

I took inspiration from the ideas of Matsunobu and Browning in order to make my form embody my content about nature. The natural environmental sound I could find on the campus of Oberlin College and Conservatory that was most clearly musical from a human music perspective was that of frogs at a pond. At first, I considered trying to play with them, similarly to what has been done in many previous shakuhachi recordings. This could be through either field recording and subsequent overdubbing or recorded live interaction. While I would like to explore those techniques in the future, I decided in this project to place excerpts from the field recording into the track without my playing happening at the same time. This is because the frogs' music felt to me like that of some culture I am not familiar with, and imposing with my own sounds without working more to understand their music felt unproductively anthropocentric. Of course, this is not a perfect process because my human agency is still the reason these sounds were even recorded in the first place, and I have the power to choose exactly how the audio is presented in the recording even without playing over it myself. Nevertheless, I wanted to practice Matsunobu's "self-integration" in a way of my own and depict the impermanence of humanity by placing the field recording excerpts both before and after the more human sounds. Furthermore, the audio effects applied to the frog recording at the end of the track represent the impact human technologies have on ecosystems.

Regarding the part of the recording with poetry reading and shakuhachi, the score in the video and the table below show what I am referencing with the seven stanzas of the poem and their corresponding musical sections. The title references summer 2021 feeling hot but actually being cool in comparison to future summers, "meditating" in the sense of shakuhachi playing's spiritual connection to nature, and "mediating" in the sense of lessening the humans versus nature gap.



LINK TO RECORDING:
<https://youtu.be/9U6FZbgAiKE>

stanza	what I am referencing
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • political commentators furthering the Eurocentric notion of music as harmony, melody, and rhythm while telling athletes to stick to sports—I am saying that culture is inherently political, and the intention behind claiming that it is not cannot be denied. (that intention being to maintain the status quo) • the idea that music must be created by human intention
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Acrocephalus palustris</i>, which is a European bird that often sings in groups while mimicking the sounds of African birds—I am saying that this must be music because of its similarity to human behavior • the need for cultural sensitivity in similar “mimicking” in humans, such as emasculated Asian men in opera characters
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Old Pond,” a famous haiku by Matsuo Bashō in which a frog makes a sound • frog populations declining due to climate change • how the frogs that appear in my field recording went silent for a few moments when I approached before continuing their sounds
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • my experiences being unaccustomed to certain cultural foods when there is some expectation that I grew up with them—the dissonance of being able to hear love, care, and community in the actual sound of them being created but not being familiar with the sound myself when I feel like I should be • people feeling the need to buy canned air from somewhere else in the world because the air where they live is so polluted
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the false and derogatory claim and/or general mindset that “jazz is a degradation of classical”—Beyond the cultural issues that this ranking furthers, I think such categorizations and hierarchies are largely unnecessary. • me transcribing/drawing musical inspiration from Dexter Gordon, Charlie Parker, and literal birds as a way of dreaming about being somewhere else in emotionally difficult times • the spaces they have lived in disappearing, meaning music venues having to close and natural habitats being destroyed
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • composers appreciating the beauty of natural sounds while still holding the anthropocentric view that they do not hold value as music outside the hands of the human composer (an alternative mode of thinking being one based on sensory sonic spaces as is found in some areas of Japanese culture⁵⁴)
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the fire in the Gulf of Mexico—I am sarcastically claiming that the sound of a fire in the ocean must be music if one defines music as only the actions of human intention because humans made it happen at the expense of nature.

A further interpretation of the connection with the environment explored in this composition involves expanding the idea of an environment to include manmade environments as Matsunobu has done. One way he conveys this concept is through an anecdote in which shakuhachi player Watazumi Fumon intentionally involves ambient city sounds in his live performance and composer Take-mitsu Tōru understands the beauty of this choice.⁵⁵ A second is through Sen no Rikyū's (1522-1591) notion of *shichū no sankyo* (市中の山居), or “a mountain hut in a city,” as an example of *ichigo ichie* (一期一会), or “one time, one meeting” (i.e., a once-in-a-lifetime experience).⁵⁶ Rikyū was able to create a space that provided visitors with momentary feelings of deep integration into nature even though they were still in urban Osaka.

Matsunobu's considerations of self-integration and *shichū no sankyo* apply to my autoethnographic methodology because they allow me to study a perception of myself as an integrated part of an environment and even expand the manmade urban environment idea to include social environments. In this way, one's relationship with nature and environments can be linked to one's relationship with other people.

Conclusion

Forms of cultural production such as music composition necessarily relate the individual to their surroundings. Just as the term and identity “Asian American” was constructed out of political necessity, the culture that supports it must be as well. I recognize the continuum of Asian American musical expression in order to compose autoethnographic music that knowledgeably furthers its legacy and purposes while adapting it to contemporary issues. As I searched for radical forms to embody radical content throughout the three compositions in this project, I was largely inspired by Fred Ho. However, I created a process of my own that differs from

Ho's compositional approach by drawing upon shakuhachi music, existing Asian American music and history, Black American music, and autoethnographic reflection.

Two possible areas of further development for future studies are class and pan-Asian solidarity. I recognize that in Ho's vision, the working class should stay at the forefront of Asian American art. For example, he decided at one point specifically to draw from Cantonese opera because of its popularity with laborers in US Chinatowns.⁵⁷ In contrast, the shakuhachi that I draw from has history as a religious device as well as some highbrow cultural associations, which could make it an unideal source by Ho's standards. However, Ho sometimes used elements from traditions that were historically more highbrow in their original Asian contexts but became enjoyed by ordinary people in Asian American contexts, such as tanka poetry.⁵⁸ Indeed, a photo of Ho's Asian American Art Ensemble in *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul* even includes a shakuhachi player.⁵⁹ Moreover, the scarcity of mindsets from Asian music in many spaces in the mainstream Western cultural world is undeniable, so I still see the shakuhachi as a valuable source of radical form. However, a focus on more clearly working class sources of radical form is a possible exploration and improvement for future studies.

The other area of prospective development is pan-Asian solidarity. As I have begun to consider the potential place of a pan-Asian quality in future work, it increasingly appears that truly complete and equitable representation is an impossibility because of the tremendous diversity of experiences amongst Asians in America and around the world. Even Jen Shyu,⁶⁰ whose extensive work, past studies, and musical influences are as pan-Asian as I can find, cannot do the impossible task of accurately representing every single Asian community. Nonetheless, some important stories are in greater need of being told than others, so I think co-

operative networks involving people of various Asian ethnicities and musical backgrounds have the greatest potential to create socially and politically effective Asian American music. I propose that instead of the many claims and labelings of “pan-Asian” music ensembles and such, a possibly more accurate and sensitive term could be “intra-Asian.”

Even with those two areas of future improvement, I see this study as a necessary and meaningful step in the right direction, even if the exact details of where that direction is leading are not apparent. As George Lewis and Miya Masaoka challenge the “Western ideas of composition as a process *preceding* performance [that have] shaped our very ideas of what constitutes music,”⁶¹ I present this paper and its complementary compositions as simultaneously a product and a process. I have both created music and research that is anti-racist in form and content and provided a robust foundation in which other artists and I can ground similar cultural work in the future.

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Notes

1 Although the term “Asian American” is sometimes used today as simply an identifier for anyone of Asian descent who grew up in America, it was originally a political term, created for the purpose of anti-racist solidarity across Asian ethnic groups and with other people of color in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

2 Choy, Peggy Myo-Young. 2013. “Somewhere between Ideology, Practice, and the Cellular War ... the Dolphins Sing: An Improv on the Fake Book of a Revolutionary Artist.” In *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul: The Radical Art of Fred Ho*, edited by Roger N. Buckley and Tamara Roberts, 179–80. University of Illinois Press.

3 Although past scholarship on African American influences in Asian American music often uses the word “jazz” or even “Asian American jazz,” I avoid it due to the history of racism and anti-Blackness that the word “jazz” carries. Using “Black American music” instead, I am referring to trumpeter Nicholas Payton’s ideology shared on social media reclaiming the art form of Black American music and his signifying use of the metadata tag #BAM. For more information, see

<https://nicholaspayton.wordpress.com/2011/11/27/on-why-jazz-isnt-cool-anymore/> and [https:// nicholaspayton.wordpress.com/2013/02/28/bam-for-dummies/](https://nicholaspayton.wordpress.com/2013/02/28/bam-for-dummies/)

4 Ibid., 83-84.

5 For example, many works by Roger Shimomura address this topic. For a small sampling, see these two links: <http://www.flomenhaftgallery.com/april-2017-minidoka-and-beyond-artwork.html> and <https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2016/spotlight-boise-art-museum>

6 I encountered the term “ethnic well-being” in Asai, Susan Miyo. 1995. “Transformations of Tradition: Three Generations of Japanese American Music Making.” *The Musical Quarterly* 79 (3): 437. Asai does not explicitly define it, but within the larger context of the article and my own musical practice, I consider it to be one’s level of satisfaction with one’s connection to identity and related cultural traditions.

7 Spry, Tami. 2001. “Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 7 (6): 706–32.

8 Esaki, Brett J. 2017. “Japanese American Spiritual Ambiguity and Arts of Silence.” *CrossCurrents* 67 (4): 668–80.

9 Esaki, “Japanese American Spiritual Ambiguity and Arts of Silence,” 670.

10 Ibid., 672.

11 Matsunobu, Koji. 2013. "Performing, Creating, and Listening to Nature through Music: The Art of Self-Integration." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 47 (4): 70.

12 Asai, Susan Miyo, "Transformations of Tradition," 440.

13 Asai, Susan M. 2005. "Cultural Politics: The African American Connection in Asian American Jazz-Based Music," 36, 36 (1): 102.

14 Matsunobu, Koji. 2014. "Musical Space, Time, and Silence in Qualitative Research." *International Review of Qualitative Research* 7 (2): 202–16.

15 Ibid., 211.

16 Esaki, "Japanese American Spiritual Ambiguity and Arts of Silence," 672.

17 Ibid., 676.

18 Ibid., 668, 671.

19 Esaki, "Japanese American Spiritual Ambiguity and Arts of Silence," 673.

20 Wong, Deborah. 2004. *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. Taylor & Francis Group, 286-7.

21 Out of the overall structure of this composition, intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-solos-chorus-outro, the first verse is a reworking of a composition of mine called "Forgotten Lullaby/思い出せない子守唄" (*omoidasenai komoriuta*, literally "lullaby that cannot be recalled") that I previously performed and recorded on my junior recital on March 20, 2021. Even though I had written lyrics at that time, that version was instrumental because of pandemic restrictions, so I incorporated that composition as one section of the vocal recording in this project.

22 Burnett, Henry. 1989. "Minezaki Kōtō's Zangetsu: An Analysis of a Traditional Japanese Chamber Music Composition." *Perspectives of New Music* 27 (2): 78–117.

23 Lam, Joseph Sui Ching. 1999. "Embracing 'Asian American Music' as an Heuristic Device." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 2 (1): 29–60.

24 Wang, Oliver. 2001. "Between the Notes: Finding Asian America in Popular Music." *American Music* 19 (4): 439–65.

25 Weisgarber, Elliott. 1968. "The Honkyoku of the Kinko-Ryū: Some Principles of Its Organization." *Ethnomusicology* 12 (3): 313–44.

26 Berger, Donald Paul. 1969. "The Shakuhachi and the Kinko Ryū Notation." *Asian Music* 1 (2): 32–72.

27 Simon, Amy D. 2017. "Shakuhachi Honkyoku: Motivic Analysis of Sokaku Reibo." *Analytical Approaches to World Music* 5 (2): 48.

28 Burnett, "Minezaki Kōtō's Zangetsu," 80.

29 Ibid., 97.

30 Matsunobu, "Performing, Creating, and Listening to Nature through Music," 66.

31 Burnett, "Minezaki Kōtō's *Zangetsu*," 82.

32 To directly compare *Zangetsu* and "Spill Your Guts" in ways more abstract than can be explained in writing, see Yamato Ensemble. "Zangetsu," track no. 2, *The Art of Japanese Bamboo Flute and Koto*. ARC Music, EUCD2497, 2014. Additionally, a performance of *Zangetsu* exists on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/VcsPlk1oY9U>

33 Burnett, "Minezaki Kōtō's *Zangetsu*," 84. The *in-sempo* mode is constructed by the first and fifth scale degrees plus semitone upper neighbors and whole tone lower neighbors for both, resulting in a hexatonic scale that resembles phrygian without the third.

34 *Ibid.*, 93.

35 Lam, Joseph Sui Ching. 1999. "Embracing 'Asian American Music' as an Heuristic Device." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 2 (1): 29–60.

36 Wang, Oliver. 2001. "Between the Notes: Finding Asian America in Popular Music." *American Music* 19 (4): 439–65.

37 Iijima, Chris Kando, Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, and "Charlie" Chin. *A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle by Asians in America*. Paredon Records, PAR01020, P-1020, 1973. (Yellow Pearl is the band name)

38 No-No Boy. 1942. *No-No Boy*, 2018.

39 No-No Boy. 1975. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW40592, 2021.

40 Burnett, "Minezaki Kōtō's *Zangetsu*," 88.

41 Doraiswamy, Ganavya. *Aikyam: Onnu. yāttirai*, 2018.

42 for more information, see Kim Saira <https://www.change.org/p/james-corden-remove-spill-your-guts-segment-on-the-late-late-show-with-james-corden>

43 Fujino, Diane C. 2013. "Return to the Source: Fred Ho's Music and Politics in the Asian American Movement and Beyond." In *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul: The Radical Art of Fred Ho*, edited by Roger N. Buckley and Tamara Roberts, 99. University of Illinois Press.

44 Two other significant uses of the multifaceted crane metaphor that are relevant to the topics at hand are the shakuhachi piece "Tsuru no Sugomori" 鶴の巢籠, or "The Nesting of Cranes" (as well as the numerous variations that all relate to cranes), and Japanese American social justice organization Tsuru for Solidarity, whose website is here: <https://tsuruforsolidarity.org/>

45 Miyamoto, Nobuko. "What Time Is It on the Clock of the World?," track no. 11,

120,000 Stories. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW40590, 2021.

46 Bellando, Nick, and Bruno Deschênes. 2020. "The Role of Tone-Colour in Japanese Shakuhachi Music."

Ethnomusicology Review 22 (1): 43–60.

47 Ibid., 57.

48 Ibid.

49 This column is meant to help the reader more deeply understand the creative processes behind this composition of mine, but it is certainly not the best source for studying traditional shakuhachi playing techniques. More complete descriptions can be found in Bellando and Deschênes, "The Role of Tone-Colour," and of course, the most direct and accurate way of understanding these techniques is by taking shakuhachi lessons.

50 Matsunobu, Koji. 2013. "Performing, Creating, and Listening to Nature through Music: The Art of Self-Integration." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 47 (4): 64–79.

51 Browning, Joseph. 2016. "Assembled Landscapes: The Sites and Sounds of Some Recent Shakuhachi Recordings."

The Journal of Musicology 33 (1): 70–91.

52 Matsunobu, "Performing, Creating, and Listening to Nature through Music," 75.

53 Browning, "Assembled Landscapes," 70–91.

54 Bellando and Deschênes, "The Role of Tone-Colour in Japanese Shakuhachi Music," 53–54.

55 Matsunobu, "Performing, Creating, and Listening to Nature through Music," 73.

56 Ibid., 73.

57 Fujino, "Return to the Source," in *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul*, 109–10.

58 Ibid., 109.

59 Fellezs, Kevin. 2013. "Enter the Voice of the Dragon: Fred Ho, Bruce Lee, and the Popular Avant-Garde." In *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul: The Radical Art of Fred Ho*, edited by Roger N. Buckley and Tamara Roberts, 49. University of Illinois Press. (photographer unknown)

60 Shyu, Jen. *Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses*. Pi Recordings, PI88, 2021.

61 Wong, Deborah. 2004. *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. Taylor & Francis Group. 282.