This is a document for Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Margaret Fernandes, Jonathan Adams, and Michelle webtext "Sounding Out in a PWI: Circulating Asian American Sound for Institutional Change" published in Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy, 26(1), available at http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/26.1/

Sounding Asian/America: Exploring Asian American Sonic Rhetorics

Please take a moment to check out and contribute to our giant post-its around the room. On these post-its you'll find a few questions we'd like you to consider. First, What is your favorite Asian American song? Or, what's an Asian American song that you think is interesting and worth discussing? And, secondly, What does Asian American sound mean to you?

Welcome and introductions: Good evening and thank you for joining us for Sounding Asian/ America: Exploring Asian American Sonic Rhetorics. A quick thanks to VT Cultural and Community Centers for their support of this event and for their work in making a celebration of Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Heritage Month possible. I'm Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Assistant Professor of English. [Jon Adams, PhD Student in Rhetoric & Writing; Maggie Fernandes, PhD Student in Rhetoric & Writing; Michelle Kim, Sophomore in English.] Jon and Maggie are in my grad seminar on Asian American rhetorics and representation, and Michelle created a fantastic poster in the library on Asian American music, that will be up through the end of this month for those who haven't already gotten a chance to take a look. [**SLIDE**] This discussion panel is centered on the question, **What does it mean to *sound* Asian America?** I've found this question to be a compelling one because I think it is difficult for a lot of people to answer. For example, many different cultural groups within the U.S. are associated with distinct styles of music—hip-hop, rap, and R&B, Norteno or other styles of Latin American music, Hawaiian, Jawaiian, reggae, or the many styles of Native American music (pow wow, peyote song, throat singing). At the same time, I'm not sure that Asian Americans are generally associated with any particular style of sound, at least in the popular imagination.

In my essay, "Sounding Asian/America: Asian/American Sonic Rhetorics, Multimodal

Orientalism, and Digital Composition," I suggested that in some ways, the long history of Asian/

American rhetorical—or meaning making—practice can be understood as a struggle to "*sound*" Asian/America. In other words, Asian/American rhetoric has largely been a persistent struggle for self-expression and self-representation, oftentimes working against characterizations of Asian cultural identity from a dominant EuroAmerican framework. This struggle to "sound" Asian/ America has often pushed back against the unrelenting stereotype of the silent, submissive, and compliant Asian body. **[SLIDE]** Take, for example, *Aiiieeeee!*, the onomatopoetic title of one of the earliest anthologies of Asian/American literary expression. "*Aiiieeeee!*" is a reappropriation of Asian sound as it was depicted in Hollywood productions: "the shout, the scream, often the only sound coming from the yellow man or woman in American movies, television, or comic books" ("*The Big Aiiieeeee!*"). As the title for an anthology of works by Asian/American writers, the sound "*Aiiieeeee!*" is re-contextualized and subverted to represent the embodied, sonic expression of rage, anguish, grief, and—perhaps—catharsis of the minoritized Asian "Other." Indeed, for Asian/Americans, expressions of racism have often emerged from markedly sonic registers. Take, for example, recent debates over the stakes and politics of performing mock "Asian" accents within popular media, as well as longstanding complaints about unintelligible Asian accents as expressed through derogatory "ching chong" chants. Consider stereotypes of the quiet Asian student or the noisy Asian tourist. Consider, in addition, stereotypes of the Asian body as mysterious, cunning, and manipulative—characterizations that seem to stem from a habit of mis-hearing the Asian "Other" as silent, withholding, and as not forthright in their utterances. These examples show that sound is of critical importance for Asian/ American

rhetoric.

[SLIDE] Jennifer Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, interrogates the relationship between listening, power, and race by "connect[ing] sound with race in American culture, showing how listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance" with deep ties to the history of systemic white supremacy in the United States (16). Stoever describes the ideological and racialized underpinnings of sound, how it is the very sonic quality of particular kinds of music like hip-hop —as opposed to its lyrical messages—that is offensive for some and empowering for others. In short, Stoever argues that "Willful white mishearing and auditory imaginings of blackness—often state-sanctioned—have long been a matter of life and death in the United States" (1). In my own work, I've offered three terms for studying sound in the context of Asian America. **[SLIDE]** First, is what I refer to as *multimodal orientalism* —or, how music, soundtracks, sound effects, voice, and accent interact with and across visual, textual, and contextual modes to re-inscribe Orientalist tropes of the Other as foreign, exotic, and threatening. **[SLIDE]** In this way, multimodal orientalism re/visions Edward Said's 1978 articulation of Orientalism as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (1). Multimodal orientalism updates Orientalism for a twenty-first-century context of participatory media, as it offers a way to understand how sound works in multimodal contexts to reproduce and reinforce stereotypes about minoritized others. In addition, multimodal orientalism builds on the extensive scholarship in Asian American studies that has theorized, identified, and critiqued visual, linguistic, and embodied race-based tropes and stereotypes about Asian "Others" within popular media, literary texts, and public policy. This work includes the

articulations of, for example, the threatening "yellow

peril;" the docile, obedient, and objectified "China doll;" the sexually eager and servile "geisha girl;" the demure and submissive "lotus blossom;" the "perpetual foreigner" who cannot speak English "properly;" the hypersexual, manipulative, and opportunistic "dragon lady;" and the one noted "kung fu fighter" (Hagedorn; Hamamoto: Ono and Pham; Prasso; Tajima; Young). Specifically, I go beyond the visual and the textual to consider how these tropes are supported, and at times furthered, through sonic strategies.

I have additionally identified two strategies for multimodal orientalism in my research on YouTube videos about East Asian blepharoplasty (cosmetic eyelid surgery). **[SLIDE]** The first is aural stereotyping, or the sonic re-inscription of old, essentialized, seemingly timeless racialized tropes to signify the "Orient" as imagined by the West based on a limited sampling and reinterpretation of Asian sound. **[SLIDE]** The most common examples that come to mind are the sound of a gong—which is, for example, audible whenever the quintessential Asian caricature, Long Duk Dong, appears in Sixteen Candles—and the Oriental or Chinese riff, which is featured in Carl Douglas's 1974 "Kung Fu Fighting" and The Vapors' 1980 "Turning Japanese" (see fig. 1). Upon hearing an aural stereotype, the listener not only immediately understands the content as Asian but also feels a sensibility that uniquely accompanies conceptions of the "Oriental" at a given time.

[SLIDE] To provide an example from my research, the YouTube video, "Asian Double Eyelid Surgery (Blepharoplasty) - Why?," which received over ten thousand views at the time of my analysis opens by engaging in multimodal orientalism. **[*Play video opening.*]** In this clip we can hear stereotypically Orientalist music in the form of a falling glissando followed by sparsely

plucked notes from the strings of what sounds like a *guzheng*. As if this music was not enough to

signify "Asianness," this sounding is paired with several immediately recognizable Asian visual tropes including stereotypically "Asian" font and an Asian eye—the physiological feature that is perhaps most often racialized as Asian. The background is greyish green in color with a shadowy circle swirled over it as if to provide a sense of mysticism—a sensibility also often attributed to the Orient. These elements work with sound to communicate the stereotypical and Orientalist idea of Asian as mysterious, timeless, essential, and unchanging.

While aural stereotyping is quite obviously Orientalist, as it constitutes a mimicry of Asian sound and as it works to render audible recognizable visual tropes, **[SLIDE]** aural othering operates on a subtler affective plane by appealing to xenophobic sensibilities of the Asian body. *Aural othering* is the use of sonic resources in a multimodal context to create the sensibility of the racialized or otherwise minoritized "Other" as alien, strange, foreign, or otherworldly. In other words, the sonic components of aural othering may not be Orientalist in and of themselves, but they instead work to represent an Orientalist sensibility when used as a way of contextualizing racialized content. Without this aural component, the audience would likely have a significantly different experience and interpretation of the visual and textual message.

[SLIDE] One can hear an example of aural othering in an episode of *VICE*'s "Fashion Week Internationale" web series titled "Seoul Fashion Week - K-Pop to Double Eyelid Surgery," The fifteen-second opening brings together sound, movement, and light to frame the video and inform viewers that they are about to witness an urban and technologically advanced environment that is strange, weird, and otherworldly. **[*Play video opening.*]** As the video begins, we hear sounds resonant of dark ambient space music: a single, higher-pitched tone is textured

with mechanical whoops and whistles. The tone repeats while a

zooming effect enters the sonic landscape; and a quick crescendo and decrescendo quakes and echoes into open space. There is a deep, vibrating mechanical hum. The sound is urban and futuristic—reminiscent of a science fiction soundtrack in the way it conjures feelings of suspense and otherworldliness. These sonic elements are accompanied by slow glimpses of Seoul at night: images of a busy street surrounded by lit skyscrapers. Headlights whiz toward viewers from a large boulevard. A collage of brightly lit storefront signage peppered with Korean and English text blur, tremble, flicker, and flash as the video fades in and out of black. The video then transitions through a black flickering effect to a building labeled "Shin Pyung Hwa Fashion Town" in bright, multicolored, neon lights.

The music bed and flashing and trembling visual effects pause and then continue. Our host begins her narration: It's 3 a.m. / on a Monday night, / and I'm shopping. / And so is everybody else. / Everything you can see around here is open. / Nobody's drunk, nothing's weird, / it's the same as during the day, it's just dark. / This is an underground station, but as you can see / it also takes you to the underground shopping center. / *It doesn't feel real; it's like a weird post-apocalyptic underground world.* / Why is it open? Why aren't people in bed? / We're definitely gonna come back at a more civil hour.

This narration is voiced by the tall, thin, and modelesque Duboc who speaks with an English accent, and who explains, "nothing's weird," moments before deciding, "It doesn't feel real; it's like a weird post-apocalyptic underground world." This paradox suggests that Duboc is experiencing a temporal and affective dissonance because "normal" activities are taking place at an *ab*normal time—abnormal, at least, for the host and her implied audience. This temporal and

affective dissonance reflects a culture of white-collar, nine-to-five work and also what

Halberstam has referred to as "family time," or, "the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing" (5). To exist in this temporally dissonant world does not "feel real"; rather, this description echoes the sonic resonances of a science fiction future—Seoul on a Monday at 3:00 a.m. feels post-apocalyptic and uncivil. This rhetoric reflects a techno-Orientalist affect that evokes Eurowestern anxieties about the hyper capitalist and mysterious East. The dark, ambient space music conjures feelings of suspense and mystery, which frames the visuals and the script addressing Korean culture in such a way that it registers as weird, otherworldly, and conspicuously foreign.

Unlike the examples of aural stereotyping, the sound effects in this video are not in and of themselves Orientalist. One likely wouldn't hear the speaker's voice or the music bed and immediately think of some Asian stereotype; but when placed alongside the visual representations of Seoul and South Koreans, the glitchy visual effects, and the narration, these elements come together to reaffirm techno-Orientalist tropes. This example demonstrates that even beyond cultural soundings (i.e., regional accent or music specific to a culture), sound works covertly to produce sensibilities that impact how we read others.

[SLIDE] To continue our exploration of Asian American sonic rhetorics, the rest of our facilitators will be focusing on a few topics: 1) Michelle will lead us in a discussion of Asian/ Asian American use of AAVE, and issues of cultural appropriation, 2) Maggie will lead us in a discussion of Asian American women in indie rock, and 3) Jon will lead us in a discussion of Asian accents in the university, focusing on the recent example of discrimination against Chinese speaking students at Duke University.