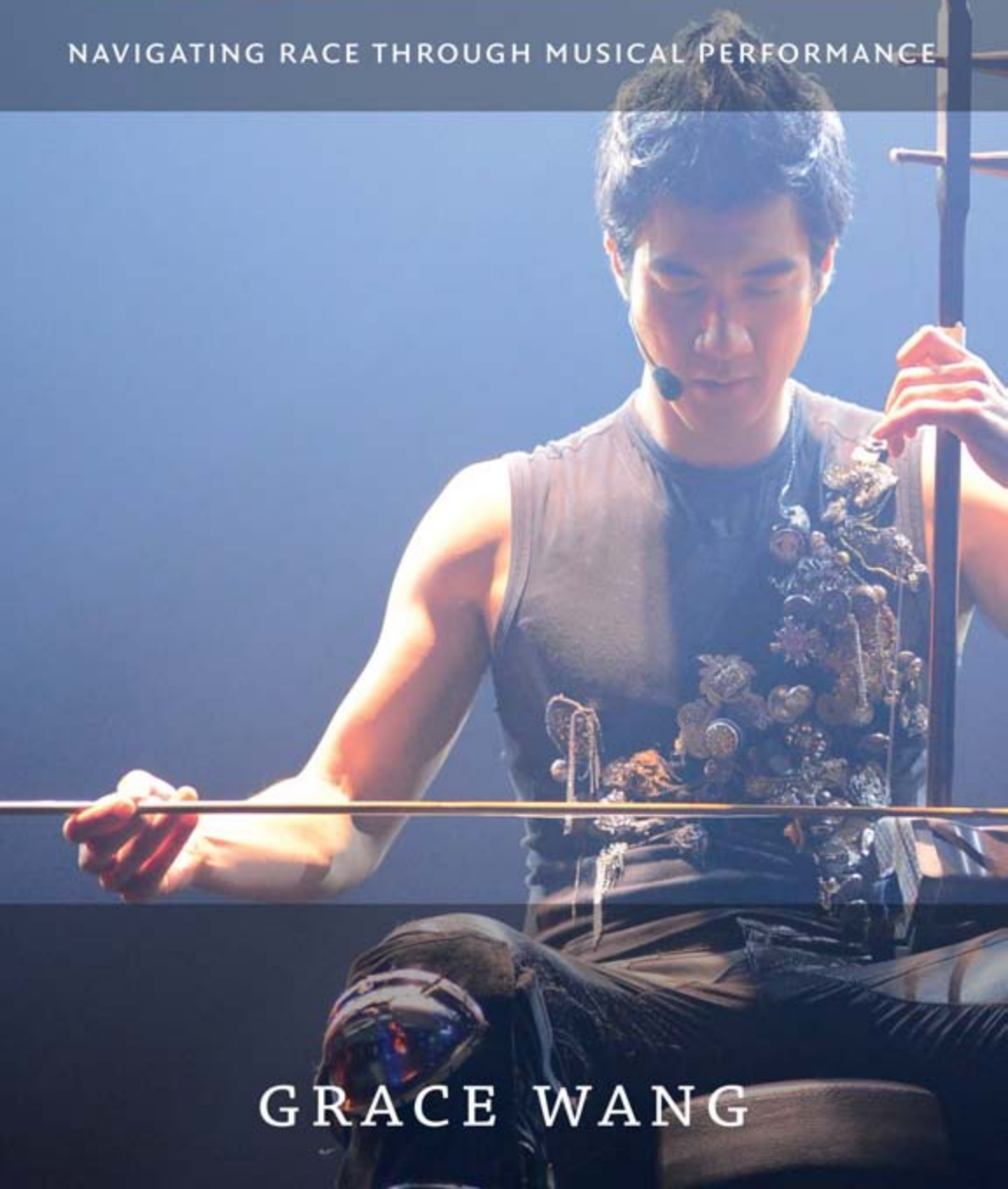


SOUNDTRACKS OF ASIAN AMERICA

NAVIGATING RACE THROUGH MUSICAL PERFORMANCE



GRACE WANG

Soundtracks of Asian America

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham & London* 2015

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Printed in the United States of
America on acid-free paper ∞
Typeset in Chaparral Pro by
Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wang, Grace

Soundtracks of Asian America :

navigating race through

musical performance / Grace Wang.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5769-8 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5784-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Asian Americans—Music—Social aspects.

2. Asian American musicians. 3. Stereotypes

(Social psychology)—United States. I. Title.

ML3560.A85W36 2014

781.89'95073—dc23

2014020687

ISBN 978-0-8223-7608-8 (e-book)

Cover art: Leehom Wang performing in Langfang,
Hebei Province, China, 2012. Photo courtesy of
Hongsheng Artist Management.

For my family

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[Music] both articulates and offers the immediate *experience* of collective identity. Music regularly soundtracks our search for ourselves and for spaces in which we can feel at home.

—Simon Frith, *Performing Rites*

In Lan Samantha Chang's novella *Hunger* (1998), Tian Sung, a Chinese violinist, flees China for the United States to pursue his musical dreams. Leaving behind home and family, he escapes in the dark of night by swimming out to sea—violin held precariously above water—until a cargo ship takes him aboard en route to Taiwan. From there, Tian earns a visa sponsorship to continue his music training in New York City. He practices diligently, pinning all his hopes on securing a full-time position at a prestigious music conservatory. Still, despite his musical talent and prodigious work ethic, he fails to gain a teaching position. Disillusioned and unwilling to compromise by working at a “lesser” institution, Tian gives up playing the violin. Resigning himself to the unskilled labor of bussing dishes and chopping vegetables at a local Chinatown restaurant, he transfers all of his dreams and ambitions onto his youngest daughter, Ruth. Tian's daughter takes to the violin quickly and shines as a young prodigy. But as a teenager, overwhelmed by her father's relentless pushing and expectations, Ruth rebels and runs away from home. By the end of *Hunger*, Tian is crushed—shattered by the weight of carrying dreams of “such flagrant and extravagant design.”¹

For Tian, being denied a permanent teaching position signaled not just a professional failure, but also a broader rejection from the classical music community and the nation as a whole. He came to the United States buoyed by the faith that hard work and talent would be rewarded equally; he upheld what he perceived as his part of the bargain by giving a brilliant faculty recital performance. But as readers of the novella come to realize, no amount of practice would have gained Tian full entrance into the exclusive culture of Western classical music. While the school cites his limited English proficiency as the official reason for discontinuing his employment, it is clear that language serves as a proxy for a broader lack of fluency in the unwritten social codes and behaviors that guide conservatory culture. Tian's refusal to go out for drinks after concerts, his awkwardness in social situations, and his inability to joke and banter with his colleagues with casualness, comfort, and ease translate into tacit understandings that he does not belong. In the eyes of his colleagues, Tian is, at best, aloof and antisocial. At worst, he is devious and untrustworthy, accused (falsely) through rumor and innuendo of pilfering a colleague's precious tuning fork. Put differently, Tian fails to inhabit fully what Pierre Bourdieu calls the social habitus of a cultural field, unable to speak with "native" fluency and ownership the language of both English and Western high culture. In the landscape of fiction, as in the realm of the everyday, distinguishing which disappointments stem from racial barriers rather than individual shortcomings is inherently imprecise. Through the accumulation of small slights, opportunities passed over, and hushed murmurs of difference, Chang's novella punctures the myth that music represents a shared universal language that transcends social categories while at the same time underscoring its continuing allure for so many.

The author's choice to have Tian work in a Chinese restaurant is fitting for a novella in which music gives expression to the hungers—the aspirational desires sought but infrequently met—that racialized immigrants experience living in the United States. Tightly coiled within the figure of Tian are conflicting layers of hope, anger, ambition, and regret: fierce belief in the promise and ideals of the U.S. nation; a deep sense of loss and alienation associated with the experience of migration; and an ever widening gulf between dreams and lived realities. In Chang's narrative, music translates this inchoate tussle of emotions into moments of breathtaking beauty: the "pure melody of the violin rising over all of

it like a great rope of silk, smooth and shimmering, shot through with glints and shades of beautiful light” (61). Music soundtracks the feeling of longing, seduces with the promise of full and unregulated belonging, gives voice to the drama of complex interior lives, and indexes the contradictory dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that marks Asian American racial formation in national and transnational spaces.

I open with *Hunger* to introduce some of the central questions explored in this book. How do Asian Americans use music to construct narratives of self, race, class, and belonging? How do musical and racial discourses converge, simultaneously eliciting feelings of transcendence and limitation, racialization and deracialization, mobility and constraint? And how do Asian Americans mobilize the multiple meanings contained in music to engage with, critique, and, at times, profit from their racial positioning in national and transnational spaces? A constellation of discourses and ideas surrounds different music genres, acquiring new meanings and ideologies as they proliferate in local and global contexts. This book investigates how Asian Americans manage, rework, and accommodate the parameters of their belonging in musical fields often considered distinct—Western classical music, U.S. popular music, and global Mandopop (Mandarin language popular music). Placing particular case studies from classical and popular music in dialogue with each other allows for greater recognition of the resonances and differences in how the racialized imagination works across music genres.

Soundtracks of Asian America interrogates the cultural work of music in the production of contemporary Asian American identities. It considers middle- and upper-middle-class Chinese and Korean immigrant parents whose intense involvement in their children’s classical music training registers their race, class, and linguistic anxieties brought about by living in a new nation and speaking a new language. It listens in on Asian and Asian American classical musicians whose visibility and prominence in their chosen profession is both celebrated and turned against them. It follows the path of young Asian American singer-songwriters who capitalize on the democratizing possibilities of YouTube to contest the limitations they face in a racialized U.S. media landscape. And it journeys with Asian American pop stars to East Asia, where their pursuit of recording contracts and fame in their respective “homelands” abroad grants them some freedom from a racially stratified U.S. music industry. Analyzing how racial constructions about Asians and Asian

Americans both facilitate and hinder the terms of their belonging in particular forms of music, each chapter foregrounds a musical space where Asian Americans are visible and investigates how and under what conditions Asian Americans have gained (and been granted) that visibility. More than an examination of specific music genres, however, this book investigates how music maps the circulation of race in national and transnational spaces and how race matters in the practices and institutions of music making. It argues that music making does not just reflect the racial order, but helps create and naturalize it as well.

Soundtracks of Asian America does not offer a comprehensive overview of music making by Asian Americans. Nor does it explore the contours of something we might call “Asian American music.” Such a marker, as music scholar Joseph Lam helpfully suggests, holds analytic utility more as a “flexible heuristic device” that enables particular modes of critique than as a musical category that somehow encompasses a heterogeneous pan-ethnic collectivity.² Rather, following the model established by ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong in her impressive study *Speak It Louder*, this book investigates how Asian Americans narrate and understand the meanings of music making in their lives. Adopting a capacious sense of what music scholar Christopher Small refers to as “musicking”—the dynamic and interactive modes with which individuals engage in music making practices—this study explores Asian Americans’ music making through a diverse range of activities, from uploading music videos to YouTube to driving kids to music lessons.³ Thinking about music as a social process that exceeds what we might imperfectly call the “music itself” disrupts a fundamental premise of Western classical music and, to a lesser degree, other music genres as well: “the extraordinary illusion—for that is what it is—that there is such a thing as music, rather than simply acts of making and receiving it.”⁴

I began this study as a way to make sense of aspects of my own background, one that overlaps with parts of the musical case studies investigated in this book. I started violin lessons at the age of five and enrolled at the Juilliard School’s Pre-College Division four years later. And while I was aware that many Chinese, Korean, and, to a smaller extent, Japanese Americans populated the music schools and summer festivals I attended growing up, this was not an aspect of music making to which I gave much thought, even if our collective presence did, at times, feel bundled up in uncomfortable essentialisms about Asianness. I certainly

intuited the powerful association of class, refinement, and erudition that my immigrant parents attached to classical music and sensed that my mother clung to these aspirational symbols even more tightly when our economic situation deteriorated after my father passed away. But when I thought about my background in music, it was in personal terms rather than through broader narratives shaped historically by immigration legislation, global economic shifts, and imperial legacies.

Still, this larger context had a way of lodging itself into my own understanding of making music. During the 1990s, when I spent a year living in Taipei playing with Taiwan's National Symphony Orchestra and freelancing around town (jobs that easily came my way on the basis of a few choice words: U.S.-trained, Juilliard, and Dorothy DeLay, a well-known teacher with whom I had studied), it was difficult to ignore the unequal relations of power that structured the global circulation of Western music. This sojourn took place during the height of the Three Tenors marketing bonanza—a moniker bestowed on the opera singers Plácido Domingo, José Carreras, and the late Luciano Pavarotti as they sang their way through sports arenas and concert halls around the world—and the Taiwanese government, presumably in a bid to raise its international profile and signal its parity with other modern states, invested astonishing sums of money to bring two of these tenors to perform (on separate occasions) with the orchestra. Such priorities felt troubling to me then even as I felt uneasily implicated within such processes. “Why fetishize a European art form rather than local or traditional music?” I remember questioning rather simply, observing the frenzied hype and adulation that accompanied the performances by Carreras and Domingo. At the same time, it was not entirely clear to me what constituted the so-called native music of a geopolitically contested island like Taiwan. It certainly did not appear to be the popular music of Taiwan, where boy bands like the L.A. Boyz (a trio of middle-class Taiwanese American teens hailing from Orange County, California) were racing up the music charts with hip hop–tinged tracks that traded on their Americanness and decontextualized citations of blackness to project a different image of modernity, hipness, and cool. I did not realize then that the 1990s marked the beginning of Taiwan's emergence as the geographical and cultural epicenter of Mandopop, the stylized pop music genre that now dominates the listening tastes of an immense global market comprising mainland China, Taiwan, Hong

Kong, Southeast Asia, and the vast Chinese diaspora. The staggering market potential symbolized by Mandopop continues to beckon aspiring Chinese American pop stars, whose dreams of commercial viability and mainstream celebrity often feel unattainable, if not wholly unimaginable, within the racialized landscape of the United States.

While aspects of my own situation led me to consider how music offers a window into a changing Asian American demographic and the affective dimensions of belonging in national and diasporic spaces, I did not intend to write on any of these topics when I shifted my focus away from music performance to academic pursuits. Not only did music making feel like a wholly separate part of my life, but within the interdisciplinary realms of ethnic and cultural studies, investigations into cultural practices marked by middle-class interests, upwardly mobile aspirations, and economic and cultural privilege felt less important than detailing the struggles, intersectional politics, and oppositional strategies of disenfranchised groups. Within Asian American studies more specifically, an ideological framework of resistance had, as a number of scholars observe, structured and limited the scope of particular topics of study. Literary scholar Viet Nguyen, for instance, notes that the privileging of Asian America as a site of “ethnic consensus and resistance to an inherently exploitative or destructive capitalism” exposes the ideological conflict, if not political discomfort, that progressive Asian American scholars feel toward increasingly neoconservative elements of the Asian American population.⁵ We can perceive such ambivalences, as literary scholar erin Khuê Ninh asserts, in the focus that Asian American studies scholarship has placed on debunking the model minority discourse as a myth—emphasizing its mobilization of misleading statistics, its elision of the poverty and criminality that exist in Asian America, and its deployment in the service of whiteness and fictions of meritocracy. Such critical refutations, however, fail to consider the affective power (and harm) that the model minority narrative holds for those who subscribe to, if not hunger to embody, its central tenets.⁶ Ninh’s own elegant examination of fictional accounts of intergenerational conflict within Asian immigrant families, alongside Nhi Lieu’s compelling analysis of the bourgeois ideals that Vietnamese refugees and immigrants strive to project through their cultural productions and consumption practices in the United States and Christine So’s literary investigation of modes of Asian American visibility

through economic exchange, among others, demonstrates the broadening of scholarship already under way within Asian American cultural studies.⁷ *Soundtracks of Asian America* draws on ethnographic and oral interview methodologies to analyze how music registers the everyday contradictions of race, desire, and belonging as experienced by middle- and upper-middle-class Asian American subjects. The narratives that the various music makers I interviewed tell, from affirming the hard-working and disciplined nature of Asians to upholding the incidental nature of race in their lives, can have the troubling appearance of replicating hegemonic narratives placed on Asians and Asian Americans. My goal is not to garner further validity to such discourses, nor to parse out what some might call the truth lodged behind stereotypes. Rather, this study analyzes how, in what contexts, and for whose benefits and interests certain narratives gain currency.

Using music as a lens of analysis, *Soundtracks of Asian America* investigates the uneven relationship that Asian Americans have to whiteness, foreignness, and color, particularly in light of the symbolic alignment between racial minority status and socioeconomic class in the United States. Given the economic integration enjoyed by some Asian Americans and their purported overrepresentation in such fields as Western classical music, engineering, science, and technology, the collectivity Asian American is often negatively articulated as “white” and no longer impacted by racism. The perception, as David Palumbo-Liu contends, is that “Asians are no longer ‘minorities’ in the sense that they are economically disadvantaged, and therefore the sensitivities of the American political economy are excused from laboring to ‘include’ Asian Americans—we have already made it ‘inside.’”⁸ And yet, as Asian American studies scholars have aptly shown, the economic diversity within Asian America notwithstanding, being on the “inside” and even achieving success has yet to yield Asian Americans the full benefits of acceptance and belonging.⁹ *Soundtracks of Asian America* asks: How and when are Asian Americans configured as minority subjects in the U.S. racial imaginary? How do Asian American musicians assess what counts as racial discrimination within prevailing frameworks that place their pan-ethnic group as somehow exempt from racism and music as an international language that exceeds social boundaries? And how do Asian Americans resolve the racialized perceptions they encounter in their music making against their own, often stated, faith in meritocratic

inclusion? This book argues that the rationalizations used to manage and explain Asian Americans' purported overrepresentation in Western classical music and underrepresentation in U.S. popular music illuminate the broader mechanisms that limit the scope of Asian American integration into the United States. The contradictory parameters of Asian American belonging find evidence in, among other fields, classical music. Whereas the wide-ranging accomplishments of Asian American classical musicians are framed and even, at times, pathologized as the product of technical natures, excessive discipline, and rote cognitive styles, the ambivalence that young, enterprising singer-songwriters express about identifying themselves, and being recognized collectively, as Asian American performers on YouTube reflects an understanding of how this ethnic marker locates them on the outskirts of U.S. popular culture.¹⁰

The first part of *Soundtracks of Asian America* investigates stories that help drive images of Asian American success. It examines how Asian American achievement in fields such as Western classical music can serve as confirmation of the magnanimity and meritocracy of the United States and of the embodied realities of "model minority" racial and immigrant subjects. It assesses stock characters at the uneasy core of model minority narratives—the "pushy" Asian parent, the over-achieving Asian American subject, the skilled Asian American classical musician—and asks: How and when do these figures function as touchstones for a broader range of intersecting racial, musical, and global anxieties? How do Asian immigrant parents and Asian American classical musicians themselves arbitrate, accommodate, and rework the multiple beliefs ascribed to their participation in classical music? And finally, how does music simultaneously provide freedom from and confirmation of racial hierarchies? In offering some answers to these questions, I follow the shifting line that separates praise and threat, tracking how unease about spaces becoming "too Asian" activates "yellow peril" anxieties that domesticate understandings about Asian and Asian American success.¹¹

The second part of the book considers how a U.S. racial imaginary loosely informed by normative assumptions of Asian Americans as model minority embodiments and not fully American/Americanized citizens functions to naturalize the dearth of Asian American performers visible in the U.S. popular music landscape. It tracks the path of

Asian American singers searching for and creating spaces and markets that would yield them some reprieve from the limitations of musical and racial inheritances in the United States. It investigates how young Asian Americans have responded to prevailing U.S. racial logics by turning to YouTube and global Asian popular music industries to imagine and promote new meanings about Asian America. These DIY (do-it-yourself) and diasporic spaces have yet to result in an Asian American singer achieving mainstream pop music stardom in the United States. At the same time, these divergent paths suggest that in a fragmented media landscape and a global cultural economy increasingly marked by the growth of Asia-Pacific dominance, “crossing over” into U.S. traditional media may not represent the only—or even the most desirable—path for Asian Americans to make music and pursue celebrity.

As these case studies differently show, newly configured stereotypes, as well as new opportunities and markets, have emerged in the wake of successes attained by Asian American music makers. I emphasize the uncanny resilience of hegemonic racial representations by closing the book with an examination of the term “tiger mother” into U.S. everyday lexicon following the publication of Amy Chua’s memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). Drawing evidence through classical music involvement, Chua’s “tiger mother” argument recycles dominant racial paradigms about Asian/Chinese parenting and cultural difference, recasting them in a neoliberal era of global competition.

Race, Universalism, and Color-Blind Intimacy

While soundtracks typically refer to the music accompanying a film and appear as background—as sonic wallpaper that shadows a scene—they also actively move a narrative forward, direct our mood and reactions, modulate pace, and shape how we imagine entering and inhabiting different social worlds. Film studies scholar Claudia Gorbman observes that “film music is like the medium of a dream, forgotten in the waking state; but this medium is itself not neutral. It embodies and disseminates meaning, all the more powerful in not actively being noticed.”¹² Like the soundtrack to a film, race filters how we listen to, experience, and rework intersecting social boundaries in music. Race hovers everywhere and yet seemingly nowhere, intuitively understood as infiltrating our understanding of music and yet frequently disavowed as actually

matter. The effort to maintain these bifurcating beliefs can, as Deborah Wong astutely contends, lead Americans “to recognize and to deny (all at once) their understandings of how American music is racialized and ethnicized.”¹³

Music represents a particularly trenchant lens through which to explore how race operates in the contemporary U.S. landscape because it is simultaneously grasped as raceless and highly racialized, a contradictory dynamic that reverberates with dominant U.S. frameworks of color blindness and meritocracy. For while music demarcates racial boundaries, reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, and conditions how we hear, feel, and even construct racial difference, it does so less through explicitly racialized claims than through other guises: coded inferences about cultural difference, claims of musical authenticity and innate ownership, intimations about possessing (or lacking) musicality and soul, and/or “neutral” articulations about talent and skill. Understanding how implicitly racialized beliefs about Asians and Asian Americans circulate through music can thus shed critical insight into how ideas about race and discrimination operate in a “post-race” era or what Arif Dirlik incisively calls a “moment of reconfigured racism.”¹⁴

Universalizing beliefs about music represent more than discursive strategies that conveniently circumvent discussions of power and politics. Rather, discourses of transcendence hold powerful resonance because individual responses to music feel spontaneous, immediate, and highly personal. Indeed, while listening to and performing music—especially music that one loves the most—the sound seems to envelop both mind and body unmediated, vibrating directly into the deepest recesses of one’s being. Ethnomusicologist Steven Feld elaborates that “the significant feature of musical communication is . . . [that] its generality and multiplicity of possible messages and interpretations brings out a special kind of ‘feelingful’ activity and engagement on the part of the listener, a form of pleasure that unites the material and mental dimensions of music as a metaphoric process, a special way of experiencing, knowing, and feeling value, identity and coherence.”¹⁵ Still, while the “‘feelingful’ activity” of music can appear intuitive and individual, it nonetheless depends on particular cultural, social, and ideological discourses. Such correlations emerge clearly, for example, in journalist Ben Fong-Torres’s recounting of his devotion to rock and roll as a young Chinese American growing up in Oakland’s Chinatown during

the 1950s and 1960s. Connecting his ardor for rock and roll—a music form often symbolic of the nation itself—to his yearning to feel (and be recognized) as American, Fong-Torres recalls that “inside the jukebox, there were no racial borders, no segregation. . . . Rock and roll was an equalizer. And for me, it was more than a way to have fun or to feel like part of the crowd. It was a way to feel Americanized.”¹⁶ Rock and roll, however romantically, allowed him to imagine inhabiting the United States differently—to glimpse an idealized vision of a nation that granted him full access and to experience, however fleetingly, the *feeling* of belonging to a nation less freighted by racial borders and inequities. Such reflections speak to the affective power of popular music and culture—its unique ability, as George Lipsitz observes, to conjure alternate configurations of race, nation, and power: “to rehearse identities, stances, and social relations not yet permissible in politics.”¹⁷ At the same time, the experience of being transported outside of time and space is mediated through socially constructed beliefs about what that sound embodies and the bodies and beliefs attached to those sounds. For transcendence, as Simon Frith suggests, “marks not music’s freedom from social forces but its patterning by them.”¹⁸

While heeding the “feelingful” pleasures of music, *Soundtracks of Asian America* emphasizes how discourses of universalism and transcendence obscure the critical role that music plays in constructing and reinforcing boundaries demarcating race, cultural ownership, native understanding, and belonging. As Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman aptly remind readers, “the longstanding metaphysical properties associated with music enhance the imagination of racial difference: race contributes fundamentally to the issues of belonging and ownership that music articulates.”¹⁹ How Asian Americans negotiate the terms of their participation in the U.S. culture of classical music and popular music—genres in which being Asian rarely represents a benefit—indexes, more broadly, the parameters of their belonging in the national terrain.²⁰ The contrast, for instance, with the meanings accrued to Asian American identity as it is positioned internationally in global pop music industries underscores the localized cultural and geographical contexts that buttress musical and racial claims.

While disavowals about the salience of race find resonance across music genres, they are particularly widespread in Western classical music given that cultural field’s historical entrenchment in discourses extolling

its universalizing principles—its unifying qualities, shared humanity, and unique capacity to transcend racial and national borders. Alex Ross, music critic for the *New Yorker*, describes the expansive and amorphous contours of Western classical music this way: “It is hard to name because it never really existed to begin with—not in the sense that it stemmed from a single time or place. It has no genealogy, no ethnicity: leading composers of today hail from China, Estonia, Argentina, Queens.”²¹ He writes, in part, against perceptions of classical music as elitist and enshrined in the past (and a musty collection of dead, male European composers). While these views imbue the music with prestige, they also make it appear ossified, archaic, and culturally irrelevant to many Americans. In contrast, Ross offers an appealing vision of a shared global culture—one free of temporal, geographical, and racial barriers and unyoked from the legacies of imperialism and Western dominance that have historically structured the movement of classical music around the world.

The rhetoric that classical music is an international language that belongs to no single group or place holds powerful allure to racial minorities as well, particularly in light of equally entrenched understandings that the music form represents the unsurpassed embodiment of European essence, achievement, and tradition, even when performed by individuals of non-European descent. The contradictions inherent within this logic allow racialized minorities to gain access to this elite cultural field while also subtly stoking suspicions that they are interlopers trespassing on terrains in which they cannot claim full “native” understanding or ownership. In this sense, although classical music may well represent the music genre most closely associated with Asian Americans in the contemporary period—indeed, playing the violin and/or piano is itself part of the stereotypical embodiment of what it means to be a middle-class Asian American—its cultural capital continues to rest on an investment in whiteness.²² At the same time, even as Asians and Asian Americans in classical music profit from this association with whiteness, their racial difference also limits their ability to access fully the benefits of its privileges and social returns.²³

While the overlap between “Asian” values of discipline, diligence, and filial piety and the rigors of classical music training helps facilitate Asian American participation and success in that field, the dominance of such racial narratives also hinders their full inclusion in both clas-

sical music and other musical fields. Reporting on the lack of Asian American pop singers in the United States, the *New York Times*, for instance, emphasized the disabling function of normative constructions of Asian Americans: “The image of the studious geek, the perception that someone who looks Asian must be a foreigner—clash with the coolness and born-in-the-U.S.A. authenticity required for American pop stardom.”²⁴ The cognitive dissonance implied by the terms *Asian* and *American pop stardom* operates on both a visual and sonic level. That is, the idea of Asian American pop stardom feels discordant not only because of prevailing perceptions of a foreign and nerdy imprint seemingly implanted in the DNA of this racial group but also because of the position that Asian Americans occupy outside of the authenticating links connecting race and popular music ownership. Although Asian Americans have always participated in U.S. musical cultures, they continue to remain absent from the racial and ethnic shorthand that intuitively exists for different popular music styles. And while the sonic linkages between “music codes and ethnic markers” are shifting and unstable—dependent on particularities of history, geography, context, and individual subjectivity—the persistent trace of authenticating beliefs continues to be patrolled in everyday assumptions that structure how we comprehend race through sound.²⁵ “Compliments” that Asian American singers receive, for instance, of sounding like a “black girl” while covering R&B songs on YouTube register the extent to which codified beliefs about race and musical genres frame Asian American music making and reception. For the pleasure derived from the asymmetry of sight and sound simultaneously reifies the normative boundaries linking race with musical ownership and expression.

The racialized landscape in which all music making takes place underscores a critical point: There is no pure mode of listening. Music education studies have shown that beliefs about race and music genre influence how listeners—even music experts—evaluate musical performance. Put differently, what we think and see influences *how* we hear. In one such study, investigators asked undergraduate music majors from nine universities across the United States to assess the performance of white and black conductors leading a choral ensemble in two different music genres, Western classical music and spirituals.²⁶ The videos were synchronized to the same musical performance such that the race of the conductor represented the only changing variable. Music students

rated white conductors higher than blacks when conducting classical music and black conductors more favorably than whites when leading the group in spirituals. Results such as these quantify the extent to which preexisting assumptions about race—from the implicit racialization of classical music and spirituals along white/black binaries to presumed correlations between racialized bodies and musical styles—serve as self-fulfilling predictions about the validity of musical perceptions. And while the controlled parameters of such studies may not find precise equivalences in the messier realms of everyday life, they nonetheless highlight the difficulty of extricating visuality from aesthetic response—of separating race and other social categories from the distilled performance of the “music itself.” Listeners tune their ears differently, filter sounds through networks of ideology that are then authenticated through purportedly impartial evaluations based on musical performance and skill. How individuals listen to and make musical evaluations is neither natural nor neutral but structured through racial regimes that exist within and beyond the realm of music.

Even in Western classical music, a music field steeped in the language of universalism and transcendence, music professionals concede that possessing knowledge about a performer impacts musical evaluation. Yet, such an acknowledgment, as *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini contends, need not imply a shortcoming. Rather, awareness of a performer’s background—knowledge of his or her life story, music training, stage in career, and other biographical details—can enrich a listener’s perception and even help the listener hear “better”: “Whether a young soprano was trained in Tokyo or Boston, whether she studied singing throughout childhood or discovered her voice in a college choir, whether she is big-bodied or petite, loose-limbed or stiff: all of these factors are crucial to assessing an individual’s gifts and needs. In other words, whether you are a master teacher, an opera buff, a concertgoer or a critic, knowing something of the background of the artist you are hearing will inevitably affect your perceptions.”²⁷ Tommasini was, in this instance, defending his colleagues who had fallen for the hoax perpetrated by Joyce Hatto, a British pianist who near the end of her life plagiarized a series of recordings as her own to great critical acclaim.²⁸ Emphasizing that music takes place in a social context, the critic noted that to dismiss this backdrop as immaterial ignores the human drama and emotional connection that music making, at its most powerful, en-

tails. At the same time, it is worth noting that Tommasini attempts to limit his remarks to the realm of the personal and autobiographical, arguing that we should resist pigeonholing artists, remain receptive to surprise, and eliminate prejudicial assumptions based on race, ethnicity, sex, age, or other social factors. What emerges from his apologia is what I call the fantasy of color-blind intimacy, a liberal humanist proposition that music critics—and listeners more generally—take into account the individual circumstances and backgrounds of performers but refrain from placing them within, or even considering that they are being influenced by, the matrices of power that delimit that subject position. Put differently, color-blind intimacy, and the corresponding faith in the possibility of color-blind listening, preclude an understanding of race as the expression of relations of power and dominance while emphasizing race as part of the incidental, anecdotal, and even pleasurable backdrop provided by a musician's personal narrative.

The belief that such modes of color-blind listening are tenable and desirable comprises part of the critical apparatus that Asian Americans and other racial minorities encounter in attempting to achieve success in musical fields in which a yearning for human connectedness is marked simultaneously by a reluctance to recognize, much less engage with, the less comfortable aspects of race. Color-blind listening confuses hearing and seeing, obscuring the soundtracks of race intimately woven into how individuals experience music making. It proposes that audiences recognize and respect difference as an articulation of humanity that somehow transcends racial (and other) histories. The entwinement of color-blind intimacy with discourses of multiculturalism means that downplaying the existence of racial barriers—at the structural and individual level—takes place alongside oft-repeated rhetoric about celebrating the racial and ethnic diversity of the nation. The powerful sway that color-blind and multicultural frameworks hold in the contemporary U.S. landscape helps explain why Asian American musicians working in both classical and popular music might express pride in their ethnic heritage while downplaying the impact that race and/or racism play in their professional lives or seek to commodify their ethnic identity while disowning the existence of racial barricades. Likewise, some musicians mobilize discourses of racelessness, universalism, and meritocracy even when such narratives do not necessarily align with their own music making experiences.²⁹ Covering the unpleasant aspects of

race and locating racism as an old problem rooted in the past are, as legal scholar Kenji Yoshino puts it, part of the implicit “social contract” that racial minorities broker in exchange for the promise of success.³⁰ Color-blind intimacy, in this way, allows for the simultaneous entrenchment of racism and its disavowal.

The metaphor of color blindness deems race a visual medium and, in so doing, elides its aural dimensions. Indeed, the invisibility of Asian American performers in the popular U.S. landscape stands in stark contrast to the visibility of orientalist sonic stereotypes proliferating what music scholar Josh Kun trenchantly calls the “American audio-racial imagination.”³¹ In countless films, television shows, and commercials we see race by hearing it, regardless of whether a racialized body appears on-screen.³² Asians, for instance, are illusively present in the stereotyped sounds that masquerade as proxies for “Asia” or the “Orient.”³³ Such sonic signifiers do not just reinforce racial hierarchies; they also structure how we apprehend race through sound. Beliefs about racial difference (and other social identities) populate the U.S. auditory landscape, from the realm of speech to the purported “accents” audible in a musical performance. Asian immigrants (and racialized immigrants more broadly) encounter language discrimination living in a monolingual nation where “accented” English maps onto broader assumptions of competence and national belonging. Asian and Asian American classical musicians continue to confront the belief that their Asianness can leave a perceptible ethnic trace in their musicianship, despite the fact that practices like “blind” auditions reveal otherwise. As I show in chapter 2, most major symphony orchestras have instituted the practice of blind auditions in which musicians play behind a screen for all (or almost all) rounds of the hiring process.

While music critic Tommasini draws his example from Western classical music, the contradictory dynamic and desire underpinning color-blind intimacy also finds resonance in the realm of popular music. Consider, for example, the public image promoted by the Far East Movement (or FM), the first Asian American group to earn the top spot on the Billboard Hot 100 and iTunes charts with their breakout electro/pop/hip hop hit “Like a G6” in 2010. A pan-ethnic group composed of members with Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Korean American backgrounds, the Far East Movement built their base through ethnic networks and hometown fans drawn from Los Angeles’s Koreatown but

began framing their Asianness as incidental, if not insignificant, as they gained commercial viability. As FM member Prohgress (James Roh) claims: “I don’t know if it’s cool to be Asian so much as it’s just cool not to care.”³⁴ While the group’s name directly references their “Far East” heritage—within the context of U.S. multiculturalism, not being proud of who you are is, as fellow FM member Kev Nish (Kevin Nishimura) puts it, “wack”—the musicians also emphasize that they are just as American as any other kid who grew up in Los Angeles: they just happen to be Asian American.³⁵ We see the contradictions at the core of color-blind and multicultural frameworks in FM’s public contentions that it is “cool” both to celebrate who you are and not to care. While the group acknowledges their ethnic background, they refrain from dwelling on or contextualizing race as part of an institutionalized hierarchical system that produces differences in experience. The band members instead articulate and project membership in a millennial generation of technologically savvy youth who see beyond racial barriers and connect virtually through social networks. That is, their attitude, fashion, and lifestyle reflect the increasing irrelevance of race and identity politics in a digitally connected, “free wired” (as one of their album titles suggests) landscape. As Kev Nish asserts: “We live in a new world where you live by your screen name. I might know more about the music you listen to, the sites you go to, before I know your last name or your heritage. We’re not out to represent any race, political thought, any religion. It’s just about making music and having fun doing it.”³⁶

Kev Nish is, on the one hand, replicating familiar beliefs about the radical possibilities for fluidity, mobility, and choice heralded by the Internet, a narrative of “post-identity” he may well feel synchronizes with his life experiences. On the other hand, we might also interpret his statement as reflecting an aspiration rather than a description—a deflection of race based on an understanding of how Asianness limits his commercial prospects in the U.S. mainstream and an indication of how he would like FM to be perceived and received. Either way, Kev Nish’s claim invites further consideration of the ways in which, in a neoliberal economic and cultural environment, consumption and commercial technology can serve—if even just rhetorically—as sources of identity. Sarah Banet-Weiser details, for instance, how digital lives mediated through commercial social media sites like YouTube are intimately linked to a broader culture of branding, where users “reference

brands not simply as commodities but as the context for everyday living.”³⁷ This context helps explain why some young Asian Americans describe their burgeoning visibility on YouTube as a social movement—an “Asian American movement” that represents an unprecedented and empowering moment of self-definition/self-branding. At the same time, as I show in chapter 3, Asian American singers also recognize how racial presumptions filter perceptions about their music making and their position within niche markets on YouTube. In this sense, rather than representing freedom from racial regimes, the pervasiveness of the digital may well signal new and contradictory spaces for the deployment, surveillance, and reinforcement of race. These technologies are shifting, as Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White put it, “our understandings of what race is as well as nurturing new types of inequality along racial lines.”³⁸ Through its investigation of new media and digital technologies, this book seeks to uncover how ideas about race and music find expression in the interactive space of YouTube, particularly in the lives of Asian American youth.

As an Asian American group seeking commercial viability in a U.S. popular landscape marked by their absence, it may be that the Far East Movement successfully capitalizes on discourses of Asian technical prowess and roboticism, reconfiguring ethnic stereotypes by recasting negative perceptions of technicality into futuristic visions of Asian techno and cool. In so doing, they begin muddling dominant fictions about what “Asianness” brings to musical production. Still, while it would be difficult to identify FM’s music sonically or lyrically as “Asian,” it nonetheless remains racialized in black cultural referents valorizing braggadocio, materialism, and excess. Aligning Asianness with the commercialized cool of blackness, “Like a G6” is specific in its aspiration for a high-flying lifestyle marked by luxury and revelry. The superficial veneer of their lyrics suggests the extent to which the grounds of a postracial landscape rest on an investment in a capitalist structure built upon a racial logic. As Jodi Melamed astutely observes, the “non-racialized language” of capitalist accumulation and market-driven individualism functions to rationalize racial inequalities such that “race remains a procedure that justifies the nongeneralizability of capitalist wealth.”³⁹ The chart-topping success achieved by the Far East Movement validates the capitalist project upon which the commercialized music industry depends while also eliding the racialized terms of the group’s belonging.

At the same time, a constellation of changing dynamics, including small shifts in traditional media marked by the success of groups like FM; openings facilitated by technological transformations, social media, and DIY artistic productions; and the emergence of global cities in Asia as spaces of cosmopolitan lifestyles and stylized modernity, represent part of a global cultural landscape that is reconfiguring the significations accrued to Asianness in national and transnational contexts. The advent of global media platforms such as YouTube, as well as the commercial growth of Asian popular music industries such as K-pop (Korean popular music) and Mandopop, have established alternate paths for young Asian Americans to pursue their musical aspirations. And while social networking platforms such as YouTube, like global pop music industries, are embedded in corporate structures, commercial interests, and U.S. racial histories, they also provide Asian American performers with opportunities that extend beyond a racially stratified U.S. music industry.

Global Circuits of Asian America

The global reach of music and the transnational travel of people, musical practices, and cultural ideas underscore the multiple affiliations and identifications that post-1965 Asian American communities hold in the contemporary period. Drawing on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's now-classic understanding of racial formation as the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed," *Soundtracks of Asian America* charts the competing political, economic, and cultural demands placed on the category "Asian American" as it travels in local and global contexts.⁴⁰ A pan-ethnic collectivity that emerged through social movements during the late 1960s and 1970s, "Asian American" coalesced different Asian ethnicities under a single category to contest shared racisms encountered in the United States, to claim cultural and political citizenship, and to create a viable alternative to the existing racial category "Oriental." And yet, as an organizing principle, a coalition identity, an imagined collectivity, an emerging market segment, a transnational formation, and a census term, the conceptual coherence of the term *Asian American* continually fractures under the weight of its heterogeneity.

New patterns of immigration have shifted the composition of Asian America to an increasingly foreign-born population and produced a