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“Digital Punk Rock Spirit:” A Spatial Reorientation of Asian American Diasporic Subcultural Subjectivities

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“Digital Punk Rock Spirit:”

A Spatial Reorientation of Asian American Diasporic Subcultural Subjectivities

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Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

Adviser, Leonard Nevarez

Adviser, Hua Hsu

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Chapter 1

Theoretical Foundations

1.1 Overview

In this thesis, I emphasize the role of transnational forces in the formation, influence, and context of various subcultures in the second half of the twentieth century. In Chapter One, I briefly situate my scholarship as inspired from a series of provocations about the scope and future of urban studies via Brenner, emphasizing the role of transnationality and digital space to highlight the arc of my thesis as moving from physical to digital, local to international, and somewhere in-between. In Chapter Two, I introduce a brief history of the Asian American ethnicized urban space through a retelling of the formation of early Chinatowns in the 19th century, highlighting the US national policies and attitudes of Chinese exclusion that formed a particular Asian American urban subjectivity. In Chapter Three, I pivot from the 1965 Immigration Acts to highlight the influence of Chinese and Taiwanese middle class migration to the United States and their unique impact on the American suburb, setting the scene for the subcultures that are the focus of this thesis. In Chapter Four, I analyze the Asian auto import subcultures of the West Coast, situating them in the

United States' history as an state-sanctioned automobile-centric built environment and gendered culture, while also identifying Japanese transnational business as a major aesthetic and capital power in shaping this distinct Asian American subculture. In Chapter Five, I detail *Zoom Lens*, a record label that emerged out of the synthesis between transnational cultural forces as well as American racial-urban politics. In Chapter Seven, I conclude this thesis by arguing for extended research and study beyond nativist/assimilationist readings of Asian American identity, proposing that an analysis of transnational cultural influences— especially those mediated through the Internet— will bring provocative and rich understandings of Asian American subcultures as a site to understand the history and possibilities that emerge from the synthesis of transnational forces, state policies, and cultural-literary analyses of historically-situated urbanisms.

In this chapter, I will describe the theoretical frameworks that inform my scholarship. I will begin my theoretical groundwork by diving into perhaps the most fundamental conceptual challenge: grappling with contemporary discourse on the phenomenon of “urbanization.” As a participant in contemporary urban scholarship, it is best for me to begin by taking up the call to complicate the notion of “urban.” This chapter seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is *planetary urbanization*?”
- How does an exploration of culture and identity relate to planetary urbanization?
- What connections between culture and global capitalism are of interest?

1.2 *Planetary Urbanism and Critical Urban Theory*

Since I am primarily focusing on questions of culture and identity to understand urban transformation, my methodologies are premised off of Brenner and Schmid's critique of the *urban age*

thesis. Brenner and Schmid describe the “urban age thesis” as the common theoretical frame that the world is becoming “increasingly urbanized” as shown by the statistically quantified movement of population from the “rural” to the “urban.” Methodologically, I avoid pursuing the notion of urbanization through the historical precedents regarding the conceptualization and statistical analysis of “the urban.” In other words, I am less interested in exploring the “urban” *merely* through purely quantitative measures such as population change and through assumptions about the ways that social practice is bounded spatially. In the essay *The “Urban Age” in Question*, Brenner and Schmid critique the usefulness of historical methods of urban study, most notably the definition of the urban through statistical observations of demographics. First, Brenner and Schmid take issue with the way that UPTs (urban population thresholds) are used to demarcate “the urban.” Brenner and Schmid note that the urban scholar Kingsley Davis delineated cities as places with a population of over 100,000 people. Although this was a groundbreaking maneuver in the 1950s at a time when demographic explorations of global urbanization were unexplored, Brenner notes that this unstable rubric for defining “the urban” presented a “problem of incomparability” that Davis attributed to “a lack of standardized cross-national data.”¹ Brenner and Schmid notes many faults to these modes of analysis, namely that it relies upon arbitrary unstable, shifting manifestations of urbanization.² Additionally, Brenner and Schmid note that these methodologies ultimately represent a major theoretical shortcoming that involves the analysis and demarcation of space: the notion of *methodological territorialism*.

Urban research done through *methodological territorialism* assumes that all social processes “are bounded and self-enclosed within clearly delineated, mutually exclusive zones.”³ Addition-

1. Brenner and Schmid 2014b, 315.

2. Brenner and Schmid 2014b, 315.

3. Brenner and Schmid 2014b, 325.

ally, this conceptual framework relies on a rural-urban binary that Brenner and Schmid describe as the *urban-rural opposition/continuum*— the classification of space using a binary of settlement spaces enumerated as either urban or rural.⁴ There are a host of other assumptions packed within. The “urban” type was presumed to be “discrete, distinct,” from the “non-urban.”⁵ In addition, this framework presumes the “non-urban” spatial typology to be *stable* in contrast to that of the urban.⁶ Brenner describes this in specific through another essay, *Theses on Urbanization*, in which the historically inherited geographic concepts of the “urban” are described in reference to “densely concentrated populations and built environments of cities” contained within particular discrete borders.⁷

I posit that a methodological approach that centers the lived and imagined urban experience of the diasporic, transnationally mediated urban subject is unique and valuable to the study of planetary urbanization because the dynamic processes that articulate cultures and identities surrounding the transnational urban subject transcends assumptions about settlement typologies as well as assumptions about the way that social processes are bounded. To examine the articulation of identity and culture requires scholars to reveal linkages across time and space. These articulations may also reveal patterns and processes that operate on the scale of the ideological. In regards to planetary urbanization, I posit that examining the processes of culture and identity in regard to the transnational urban subject allows scholars to make salient connections from and between lived urban experiences and imaginaries as well as ideological-scale patterns that reconfigure both physical and imaginary space across different terrains and geographies.

4. Brenner and Schmid 2014a, 325.

5. Brenner and Schmid 2014a, 161.

6. Brenner and Schmid 2014a, 161.

7. Brenner 2014, 185.

According to Brenner and Schmid, the theoretical concept of the “urban” articulated through the urban age thesis does not accurately fit the contemporary situation of 21st century human society. Regarding the geography of *planetary urbanization*, Brenner cites Soja and Kanai, who use the notion of *polycentricity* to describe the phenomenon of which urbanization as a “way of life” has exploded externally from the borders of what were historically cities with discrete centers for social, economic, and as a whole, general human social activity.⁸ Instead, planetary urbanization consists of phenomena of ideological scale which create “urban galaxies,” whose social functions and even demographic measures have created numerous centers of activity reflecting new epochal configurations of capital flows and development guided by “national, state, and provincial governments.”⁹

Brenner additionally attempts to lay a foundation for the methodologies in which *planetary urbanization* should be explored. Brenner accomplishes this through a critique of what Brenner identifies as “Lautourian actor-network theory” as well as “neo-Deleuzian concepts of assemblage.” According to Brenner, these intellectual approaches favor “place-based narratives” and “thick description” over macrostructural and abstract theorization.¹⁰ Brenner’s issue with these approaches is in regard to what Brenner identifies as an indeterminacy through which scholars define the concept of the “urban” to various broad “referents, connotations, and conditions—” all while remaining uncritical about the role of ideology and its manifestations. Brenner identifies “worldwide capitalist restructuring” through “dispossession and uneven spatial development—” concepts that that ultimately contextualize the “place-based contexts” approaches that Brenner

8. Brenner 2014.

9. Brenner 2014, 183.

10. Brenner 2014, 187.

is critical of. Brenner claims that these are particularly salient concepts that are obscured when scholars privilege the examination of micro-scale urbanism over larger scale social phenomena.¹¹

As a result, Brenner calls for scholars to operate in specifics when discussing the notion of the urban. In writing about the notion of *planetary urbanization*. Brenner's lens of analysis is situated in a materialist critique that emphasizes the flows of labor and capital across geographies. Reflecting on the historical epistemological inheritances of the concept of the urban, Brenner asserts that "the urban appears to be a quintessential floating signifier: devoid of any clear definitional parameters, morphological coherence or cartographic fixity[...] it is used to reference a seemingly boundless range of contemporary sociospatial conditions, processes, transformations, trajectories, and potentials."¹² Brenner seems to primarily views these maneuvers through the lens of "accumulation and spatial regulation" manifesting itself through "intercontinental transportation corridors, large-scale infrastructural, telecommunications and energy networks, free trade zones, transnational growth triangles and international border regions." This thesis is an attempt to use these lenses of examining capital flows, identifying the urban, cultural, racial subjectivity of Asian American periodizations of space and urbanisms through the convergence of national policy as well as social context.

1.3 Planetary Urbanization through Cultural Processes

One of Brenner's theses on urbanization is that "a new lexicon of sociospatial differentiation is needed."¹³ My reading of Brenner's text is that Brenner is specifically calling for scholars to

11. Brenner 2014, 187.

12. Brenner 2014, 185.

13. Brenner 2014, 192.

theoretically supersede merely demographic measures and casting aside the urban/rural divide as a tool to differentiate space. Instead, there is a need to examine remote linkages and the ways that transnational flows of capital create a variegated urban fabric. If the field of urban studies should attempt to understand spatial differentiation, Brenner argues that there is a need to focus on the *sociospatial processes*, the *constitutive essences* through which modern capitalism reconfigures space.¹⁴ Answering this call, I posit that transnationally mediated social processes such as the production, destruction, and blurring of cultures and identities are particularly salient modes of analysis for the theorization of planetary urbanization.

I am interested in using the work of critical urban scholars to add in the “context of context”¹⁵ that Brenner seems to bring to the forefront of the emerging discourse on planetary urbanization. Perhaps the methodology of centering culture and politics through examining both embodied and imagined accounts of planetary urbanization can help scholars understand the ways that national policies and the spatio-racial landscapes form backdrops for racialized identities and cultures. Additionally, I observe that this epistemological crisis in critical urban theory has yet to permeate spaces outside of academia. I am hopeful about the kind of macro-scale patterns and transnational linkages that this discourse can illuminate, and I am hopeful that this discourse can reveal trajectories of the future of global capitalism. Perhaps these theories can predict unforeseen sites of mass social struggle or even help activists and scholars strategize around the status quo’s contradictions and instabilities.

14. Brenner 2014, 192.

15. Brenner 2014, 187.

1.4 Asian Americanness and Transnationalism

To explore this thesis, I am doing the work of uniting scholarship that is normally understood as “Asian American studies” work, enriching it with more informal sources such as blogs, interviews, and videos, and drawing from a variety of media scholars and commentators to emphasize the role of Japanese transnational forces. I posit that literature on articulations of identity and political imaginaries in regard to the term “Asian American” are crucial tools in highlighting various linkages of the hypothetical transnational *Asian American* subject. A key engagement of my thesis is the articulation of Asian American identity, situated in a critical position with the notions of ethnoracial, Asian American nationalist essentialism. Thus, my argument about the transnationally mediated *cultural interpolation* in Chapter Five is inspired by the call to challenge essentialist notions of Asian American racial and cultural identity. Instead, I am positing cultural interpolation as a historically and socially contextualized *articulation* against an essentialized construction of Asian American identity.¹⁶

My exploration of transnationality stems from Aihwa Ong’s questions on the relationship between flexible citizenship as a cosmopolitan ideal and its relation to the expansion of global capitalism. Chapter Four gives context to this idea through identifying middle-to-upper class transnational citizens who host “parachute children” who embody a unique sense of transnational diasporic identity that serves as a clear example of a diasporic transnational subjectivity in the post-1965 era.

16. Nguyen and Tu 2007, 5.

1.5 The Transnational Subject as Theoretical Approach

It is important to take this call seriously if my work is to present meaningful connections to the contemporary condition of *urbanization as a process* rather than *urban as a settlement typology*. My thesis is an attempt to explore the value of the transnational subject as a subject that can illuminate these particular transnational, variegated processes of planetary urbanization. As an epistemological endeavor, I am also interested in bringing critical urban theory into conversation with scholarly discussion on the politics of culture and race. Critical urban theory often lies in the macro and abstract scale. I hope to use these theoretical tools to make the connections between the personal and artistic— the “thick description” and “place-based” contextualization— and the macro and theoretical. At the same time, I am also critical of reinforcing an epistemological binary between the scales used to write about social theory. I hope that my work can traverse the space between the personal and the state; the imaginary with the lived.

My thesis seeks to explore Brenner and Schmid’s notion of *planetary urbanization* that relate to the “new scales of urbanization” as well as the “blurring and rearticulation of urban territories.” I argue that the transnational subject is a crucial concept for future scholarship, if planetary urbanization is to be taken seriously as a tool to also understand the ways that planetary urbanization also shapes culture and social patterns. In the present, it appears that urban theory is currently focused on theorizing from a vantage point that is more often disembodied from the sensorium of the Asian American urban subject. Additionally, illuminating the transnational subject helps scholars understand planetary urbanization from a vantage point that intimately relates to the way that common peoples think about and experience the urban: through storytelling, culture, and everyday life.

Chapter 2

1800's and the Old Chinatown: Early

Chinese Migration to the United States

Colloquially, the term “enclave” is used to refer to places usually within the “city” typology signifying spatially dense agglomerations of residential, commercial, and industrial spaces which are settled by a particular group of “ethnic” communities. In the United States, these ethnic communities are typically defined as non-White groups such as African Americans, Asians and Latinx. The notion of the ethnic enclave has changed during the late 19th century to the 21st century, and can be loosely periodized. What is the difference between the “ethnic enclave” and the “immigrant neighborhood?”

In general, the ethnic enclave in the United States arose from deeply rooted histories of racism and discrimination in the United States, which prevented many people of color in the United States from owning property. Although I will mostly be focusing on Chinese and Taiwanese ethnic enclaves in specific, the common thread of White racism created some common threads between the development of early Asian American ethnic enclaves and African American enclaves.

Additionally, various archetypes of the ethnic enclave have been proposed by urban scholars. The origins of Asian migration to the United States is tied to a complex history of transnational forces and is deeply interwoven into the history of European imperialism.

2.1 Trap or Springboard?

Is the Chinatown a springboard or a trap? The notion of Chinatown as a trap constructs the enclave as ultimately undesirable and limiting for the ethnic resident. While one can view the enclave as a site of safety and protection from racial discrimination, some scholars also emphasize the enclave as a site of confinement and impedance. This archetype of the enclave ultimately fits in well with classic sociological theories that attempt to describe the social trajectory of immigrants to the United States. A popular sociological theory proposed that the immigrant is a passive subject whose ultimate outcome is to either be assimilated into the dominant White American society and move outward into the suburbs to pursue home ownership and an idealized notion of White middle class socioeconomic success. This notion of upward mobility suggests that the immigrant must shed their native language and cultural practices in order to fully transcend the boundaries of their racial group and become fully “American.” In addition, assimilation is held to be the “irreversible and inevitable” outcome of this purportedly natural process— classical sociological theories leave no room for other conceptualizations of urban cultural production, and presume that the potential for cultural production held by immigrants is overshadowed by the dominant White culture.¹ In Min Zhou’s study of Chinatowns in the United States, Zhou asso-

1. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 20.

ciates this classical sociological view with another archetype: the Old Chinatown— Chinatowns founded before and during the early 20th century.

The most well-documented archetype of Asian American ethnic enclaves is the “US Chinatown as a haven for unassimilable immigrant.” First, we begin with the social conditions that brought Chinese laborers to the United States, as well as the racial formations that gave 20th century Chinese Americans the incentive to find protection and safety within the enclave. This archetype also spatializes the Orientalist theme of Asian people as perpetual foreigners by imagining the enclave as a place where Chinese Americans (and other Asian peoples) can purportedly live and resist assimilation into White society. Kwong begins the history of Chinese migration to the United States with the migration of Chinese laborers from China to the United States during the Gold Rush of the 1840s. During this time, large US mining companies sought cheap laborers to work underground mines.² This brought the first wave of Chinese migration— 25,000 Chinese in California— to the United States as “coolies” under contract labor. The population of Chinese laborers in the United States grew massively during the later half of the century, reaching around 105,000 by 1875.

The early history of the US Chinatown is also related to the Southern agricultural industry and the enslavement of African Americans, which sparked an influx of Chinese migrant labor during the mid 1800s. Chinese “coolie” labor was introduced to the United States through southern agricultural employers, who were faced with a labor crisis after the Civil War. After the abolition of slavery and the end of the Civil War, Southern plantation owners could no longer rely on free Black laborers due to their newfound civic and political power and sought to replace free Black laborers. Thus, they turned to Chinese immigrant labor to continue their agricultural enterprises,

2. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 12.

citing that Chinese “are said to be better laborers[,] more intelligent and can be had for \$12 or \$13 a month and rations.”³ However, this reliance on coolie labor (involuntary, bonded labor) shifted to a reliance on migrant labor, which was voluntary and not in bondage.⁴ White American plantation owners imported Chinese laborers to replace Black laborers, and did so because of their status as perpetual aliens who could not vote as a means of resisting labor exploitation.⁵ This massive increase in immigration was the result of cheap non-Black labor needed for large infrastructure projects, such as the Transcontinental Railroad and levees, as well as other industries such as textile mills and salmon canneries.⁶

However, a wave of xenophobia and anti-Chinese sentiment arose as a way for White laborers to unite against monopoly capitalists who used Chinese labor as “strike breakers.”⁷ The Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882, which blocked the immigration of Chinese laborers until 1942, along with rally cries such as “The Chinese Must Go,” created a wave of anti-Chinese hostility that resulted in mob violence and abuse.⁸ Driven out of small towns and villages they formerly occupied, Chinatowns were formed by single migrant men in large US cities as ghettos: places that did not “assimilate” into the larger surrounding mainstream White American city like the urban ghettos of Jewish, Italian, or Polish immigrant communities. Instead, residents of these early Chinatowns were forced to stay in these quarters as a result of being excluded from the mainstream labor market in the United States.⁹

3. Okihiro 2014, 45.

4. Okihiro 2014, 46.

5. Okihiro 2014, 62.

6. Kwong and Miščević 2005, 12.

7. Kwong and Miščević 2005, 13.

8. Kwong and Miščević 2005, 13.

9. Kwong and Miščević 2005, 14.

Chinatowns were also simultaneously spaces of safety. The town of Locke, California was founded in 1914 by Chinese agricultural laborers who sought to escape the urban reality for Chinese Americans of the 1800s, “In the past, the whites would attack you with stones when you walked through some of these towns[...] We never dared to walk on the streets alone then— except in Locke. That was our place.”¹⁰ Thus, the early Chinatowns and other ethnic enclaves formed by immigrant worker communities were simultaneously marked as spaces of confinement through racial segregation as well as spaces of freedom from the violence of racial discrimination.

2.2 1970's - The Golden Age of the Chinatown

During the 1960's, some well-educated Chinese immigrants (many from Hong Kong) chose to settle in existing Chinatowns located in large metropolitan centers such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, and Seattle. Arriving with entrepreneurial skills, they sought to escape the political turmoil in Asia, transferring their assets to the United States and using their capital and entrepreneurial skills to invest in businesses such as grocery stores and the garment industry.

Kwong considers the 1970s to be the “golden age” of the Chinatown in the United States for the following reasons: new capital investment, a new wave of class diversity among Chinese residents, a variety of services, and white collar jobs.¹¹ Although there was still the image of the enclave as a “trap” to escape, Kwong cites that popular observation imagined the enclave of the seventies to be a fully-serviced social structure that could provide jobs for new immigrants as

10. Okihiro 2014, 109.

11. Kwong and Miščević 2005, 322.

well as linguistic and cultural solidarity.¹² From popular analysis, it seemed that the enclave was imagined as a site of promise and upward mobility.

At first, it seems that the Chinatown of the 1970s held a promise for a prosperous and wholesome American life in the eyes of the Chinese immigrant. In comparison to the segregated social lives of Chinese Americans in 19th century historic Chinatowns, the seemingly self-sufficient, entrepreneurial Chinatown of the 1970s seemed to be a viable American alternative lifestyle for Chinese immigrants. The landscape of services seemed to shift in the Chinatown, with bilingualism becoming a prominent feature in many services such as banks, phone companies, hospitals, and even government social service offices and day care centers. Bilingual, middle-class Taiwanese and Hong Kong professionals arrived in the American Chinatown, serving as real estate agents, lawyers, dentists, acupuncturists, and even travel agents, specialized doctors, and stock brokers.¹³ From the perspective of goods and services, it seemed that the Chinatown was a place of urban vitality and warm community.

One can also perhaps imagine a cultural renaissance and distinct sense of Asian American (Chinese American) urban subjectivity taking hold in the Golden Age Chinatown of the 1970s, with the increased visibility of Chinese-run businesses and services as well as the success of various Chinese-language media endeavors including local newspapers, Cantonese video rental stores, and the availability of Hong Kong films in movie theaters.¹⁴ Chinese cultural traditions also seemed more visible in the Chinatown during this era; one could buy moon cakes for the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, rice cakes for Chinese New Year, and paper luxuries to burn for Grave-Sweeping Day.¹⁵

12. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 322.

13. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 321.

14. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 321.

15. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 321.

Kwong notes that these Chinese communities were described by sociologists and popular press as thriving, "full-service," "multi-class" communities that were compared to other ethnic neighborhoods such as the Cuban Little Havana enclave in Miami. However, Kwong notes that this idealized view of the 1970s Chinatown disguised the fact that intra-ethnic class inequality and cheap labor was an important part of the social structure. For example, Chinese immigrants to the enclave began as menial laborers for Chinese businessowners, working long hours and low pay. Long hours, no compensation for overtime, no holidays, and no sick leave were common features that hid behind a cheerful veneer of intra-ethnic solidarity.¹⁶ Sweatshop labor and the involvement of Chinese immigrant women in the garment industry became emblematic of the social reality of labor exploitation that also doubled as a way for lower-class Chinese immigrants to gain footholds within the United States— but in poverty and in service to support a wealthier class of Chinese business investment nonetheless.

The US garment industry during the early twentieth century primarily consisted of unionized Jewish and Italian immigrants, who began to retire as the mid-century approached due to increased international manufacturing competition. In the 1960s, the US garment industry began to hire more non-White laborers in order to stay afloat. US garment manufacturers made a strategic maneuver to hire more non-White laborers, who were not unionized and thus provided a source of cheap labor.¹⁷ While the percentage of garment manufacturing jobs in New York fell to nearly 40 percent, these economic circumstances caused the number of Chinese women workers to grow from 8,000 to 2,000. This additionally allowed Chinese subcontractors to gain power in managing non-English speaking Chinese laborers, with the percentage of Chinese-owned New

16. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 322.

17. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 319.

York garment factories reaching 90 percent in the mid 1960s.¹⁸ When downtown rents began to rise and offshore manufacturing rose in quality, subcontractors that worked for garment companies in the United States were more deeply incentivized to pay workers lower wages to maximize profits—effectively creating sweatshop labor conditions in New York.¹⁹

2.3 Financial Investment Transforms the 1970s Chinatown

The seemingly cheery decade of the 1970s was quickly shattered by perhaps its own image of success and opportunity, which attracted foreign Asian investment that eventually reconfigured the built landscape of the 1970s Chinatown and thus changed the social lives of its residents. According to Kwong, speculative investment in real estate, funded by capital from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao radically transformed Chinatowns and ushered the Chinatown out of its Golden Age of the 1970s. Due to geopolitical uncertainties as well as the 1973 energy crisis, many East Asian investors were anxious to diversify their assets through foreign investment.²⁰ Hong Kong invested \$3 billion from 1974 to 1988 on banking as well as high-end hotels and office properties located in large metropolitan centers such as Los Angeles and New York City. Further adding to the enormous inflow of foreign capital, the US deregulation of international banks in 1981 caused a spike in the presence of international banks within the United States.²¹

While the Chinatown of the 1970's seemed to create a path to upward mobility through expanded opportunities to work and fulfill economic, cultural, and social needs, it seemed that as early as 1971, Chinatown was already on the way to undoing itself as a haven for new immigrants.

18. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 319.

19. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 328.

20. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 324.

21. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 325.

In 1971, the International Hotel in San Francisco's Chinatown was closed, and fifty-five elderly residents were evicted, stirring uproar and concern for affordable housing.²² Real estate in Chinatowns became an extremely profitable market, with land values rising due to limited space for expansion.²³ Old loft buildings and run-down tenement housing was torn down to be replaced with high-price residential space and offices.

The rise in speculative real estate development was a primary factor that led many Chinatown residents to leave Chinatowns, causing them to leave the lucrative locations of Chinatowns located near metropolitan downtowns in search of more affordable housing elsewhere. In comparison to the Chinatowns of the 19th century, the exclusionary criteria seemed consistent with the way that class was being emphasized over explicit racism in the realm of popular discourse. Thus, for the displaced Chinatown resident, choosing a new homes seemed to be more contingent on housing costs rather than blatant and explicit racial discrimination.²⁴

However, this seemed to create a cyclical pattern of exit, resettlement, and reinvestment, resulting in Chinese ethnic enclaves relocating in a constellation of Chinese enclaves such as New York's Sunset Park and Oakland and Richmond in the San Francisco Bay Area. Chinese residents moved further and further away from original downtown Chinatowns as they moved out of their original neighborhoods due to land value inflation. In their new neighborhoods, they increased land value in formerly cheap places by opening up businesses, using their savings to purchase and renovate old properties, and eventually selling it for profit.²⁵

22. Kwong and Mišćević 2005, 326.

23. Kwong and Mišćević 2005, 323.

24. Kwong and Mišćević 2005, 332.

25. Kwong and Mišćević 2005, 334.

This urbanization pattern in which Chinese ethnic enclaves experienced cyclical re/settlement patterns sets the backdrop for the ethnoburb, which became the site of a multicultural, visibly ethnicized Asian American sub/urban presence of which I will explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Post-1965: The Ethnoburb

3.1 Legal and Social Changes: From Chinese Exclusion to the 1965 Immigration Act

The period of Chinese exclusion lasted from 1882-1943 and consisted of a socioeconomic arrangement of immigrants that did not intermingle. The social configuration of Chinese immigrants in the US was marked by global economic arrangements whose patterns of capital flow predated the particular capital flows of the midcentury global order. During the America of the "Old Chinatown," poor Chinese immigrants relied on coethnic economies and social support systems for survival. Additionally, exclusionary labor laws confined working-class Chinese people in racially segregated urban ghettos.¹ These social and legal conditions positioned the immigrant enclave as "trap" and presumed that upward mobility and assimilation to be the ultimate trajectory of immigrants and future generations of immigrants who lived in these Chinatowns. Most Chinese

1. Kwong and Miščevič 2005, 316.

immigrants during this period were poor, working class laborers, who did not have much social interaction with the few wealthier Chinese immigrants who were able to cross borders using their class advantages.

The few Chinese immigrants who were allowed to arrive during the period of Chinese Exclusion were admitted for temporary entry. Some merchants, government representatives, and students seeking advanced degrees were allowed to enter the United States during this period. The Immigration Law of 1924 was a legal barrier that curated a specific demographic of Chinese immigrant by creating limitations on immigrants based on national origin as well as other socioeconomic factors. Applicants were required to have a bachelor's degree, been approved by an American higher education institution, be financially self-sustaining, and English-skills. While the waves of Chinese immigrants pre-1950s were mostly from peasant origins and spoke little to no English, hailed from Southern Chinese areas (near modern day Guangdong) and spoke Cantonese. In contrast, many of the wealthier post-1924 immigrants spoke other dialects of Chinese and arrived from culturally and economically rich cities such as Shanghai, Peking, and Nanking.² This early class of intellectuals rarely remained in the United States, instead choosing to return to China to pursue high-ranking government jobs that were otherwise unavailable for Chinese intellectuals in the United States due to the threat of anti-Chinese racism.³ Thus, for the class of early 20th century Chinese intellectuals who were able to immigrate to the United States to receive higher education, the United States and its Chinatowns were not a stepping stone to social mobility within the American class system. In contrast to future waves of upper-class Chinese immigration, these early 20th century transnational subjects did not necessarily establish power-

2. Kwong 1996, 16.

3. Kwong 1996, 15.

ful roots in the United States nor social and economic transnational linkages between the United States and China.

This era of the Chinatown gradually shifted into the post-1965 ethnic enclave, brought on by loosened legal barriers to immigration, US citizenship, and broader assimilation into the "melting pot" of the United States. These paradigm changes in legal structures were accompanied by a vastly different racial project: neoconservative colorblind racism. The Chinatown once served as a place for immigrants to remain protected from harassment and violence dealt by mainstream White American society. In contrast, the post-1965 ethnic enclave was marked by subtler forms of racism brought on by the apex of social uprisings and Black activism toward civil rights progress, which brought attention to other racially marginalized groups such as Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans.⁴

The 1965 Immigration Act also shifted the demographics of Chinese immigration to the United States. According to Kwong, the 1965 Immigration Act was designed to make concessions for Chinese Americans by allowing the entry of relatives of Chinese Americans. These relatives settled with their family members in existing Chinatowns. The 1965 Immigration Act additionally sought to improve the economic workforce of the United States by attracting skilled and educated professionals, who in contrast did not have to settle in Chinatowns for protection and cultural/linguistic acclimation and instead were able to directly join the American middle class. The ethnoburb is the site of which this class of professionals chose to establish roots in.

4. Kwong 1996, 26.

3.2 The Ethnoburb and Theories of Urban Ethnic Spaces

The ethnoburb is historically situated in the context of White flight and suburbanization.⁵ The Chinese American geographer Wei Li coined the term ethnoburb, imagined as a hybrid between inner-city ethnic enclaves and suburbia. The ethnoburb primarily describes clusters of ethnic suburban people and businesses and proposes that the suburbanization of ethnic communities does not always accompany complete assimilation.⁶ In contrast, classical sociological theory on immigrant neighborhoods assumed that immigrants arrived in conditions of poverty and acquired upward mobility. These theories about the futures of Chinese immigrant communities were fueled by observations of White ethnic communities that disappeared due to a urban-to-suburban upward mobility pattern, for example, "Little Italy" which "spatially assimilated" into American suburbia as well as the larger melting pot of American society.

But what happens when Chinese middle class ethnic communities do not form in the "inner city" or inner rings of the Chicago School model, but instead form distinct ethnic communities in the suburban fringes of major urban centers? This idea of skipping Chinatown as a transitional space disrupted the linear trajectories of Chinese immigrants predicted by earlier urban sociologists. Chinese immigrants to the ethnoburbs do not settle in the "inner city" neighborhoods of the Chinatowns of the past but instead migrate directly to suburban fringe neighborhoods. They skip the inner city ethnic enclave, once imagined as a transitional site of which immigrants sought to move out of.

Monterey Park, a suburb of Los Angeles, is a key case study of the ethnoburb phenomenon in the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California. Monterey Park, once a predominately White post-

5. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 79.

6. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 81.

war suburb, gradually transformed into a model for ethnic suburban middle-class living. During the nationwide housing boom after World War II, 1950's Monterey Park was an affordable "bed-room community" that fit the mold of the stereotypical predominately White post-war American suburb, composed of single-family free-standing homes and grassy lawns. Although Monterey Park remained 85 percent non-Hispanic White throughout the 1960s, its location near Downtown Los Angeles made it an attractive settlement for the educated, middle-class second and third generation Hispanic (12.0 percent) Asian (2.9 percent), upwardly mobile Americans who wished to pursue suburban living. In 1970, Monterey Park became the first ethnic diverse middle-class suburb.⁷

Ethnoburbs reflect a stratified class order of primary and secondary labor forces that reflect the larger mainstream economy. The primary labor force consists of well-educated professionals and business class Chinese.⁸ Global restructuring brought a wave of immigrants and foreign capital from Taiwan and the Pacific Rim. This was the force that set into motion the transformation of Monterey Park into an ethnoburb colloquially referred to as "Little Taipei." One of the most significant differences between the ethnoburb and the "old Chinatown" is the demographic composition of ethnoburbs. Although populations of poor, working class Chinese laborers continued to immigrate to the United States after 1965, the Chinese immigrants who settled in Monterey Park during the 1980s were primarily wealthy investors, entrepreneurs, and other professionals. Many of these professionals had higher levels of education than other immigrants and had previous entrepreneurial experience as members of the business class before immigration.⁹ How-

7. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 82.

8. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 88.

9. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 82.

ever, the ethoburbs are not only places of wealth and upward mobility. They are also home to a supporting class of low-skilled Latino, Chinese, and other Asian workers.

The idea of "segmented assimilation" attempts to describe the cause for this particular social phenomenon. Segmented assimilation emphasizes the role that class and racial stratification play in shaping immigrants' experiences with assimilation, proposing that specific social contexts determine assimilation outcomes. Rather than predict that immigrants are destined to be upwardly mobile and experience spatial and cultural assimilation into mainstream American society, segmented assimilation proposes a variety of outcomes or pathways for the immigrant. Zhou highlights a few clear patterns: upward mobility, of which immigrants culturally assimilate into mainstream American society; downward mobility, in which immigrants remain in the margins of mainstream American society, and finally, a third pattern in which immigrants obtain socioeconomic entry into mainstream America, but do not necessarily shed the cultures of their homelands.

Instead, these immigrants preserve the social institutions, social ties, values, and norms of their ethnic community; effectively reaffirming ethnicity and providing the social networks and social structures for upward socioeconomic mobility.¹⁰ It is in these social circumstances that scholars can explicitly identify a unique transnational urban subjectivity that the Chinese ethnoburb resident embodies.

10. Zhou 2009, 11.

3.3 Transnationality as Disorder

The ethnoburb introduced a peculiar new arrangement of gender and family structure. In contrast, pre-1965 waves of immigrants are generalized as members of a "bachelor society" in which working class Chinese men immigrated to the United States and left behind their wives and children in China. In contrast, wealthy and business-class Chinese of Monterey Park were deeply transnational subjects due to their existing ties to their homelands and businesses that was not severed but remained upon immigration. Additionally, new structures of family organization through transnational family arrangements. Some of these wealthy Chinese businessmen became known as "spacemen" or "astronauts" who spent most of their time in air transit, leaving wives and children in the ethnoburb to move back between the "Pacific Shuttle."¹¹ A new kind of Asian American emerged from the ethnoburb: "parachute kids" dropped off in the United States to receive a competitive education and physically (but not financially) separated from their birth parents. These lifestyles stood in great contrast to the White American nuclear family stereotype that accompanied images of the postwar suburb that Monterey Park once exemplified, and has been the subject of fascination and intrigue by various Western observers.

The reconfiguration of urban social life as well as its accompanying built environment has been historically met with anxiety, speculation, and undertones of moral concern by philosophers and observers. Similar sorts of speculation has been made about the upper-class Chinese ethnoburb, home to this new class of parachute children." This criticism echoes the tradition of classic urban texts such as Georg Simmel's *Metropolis and Mental Life*, which attempts to describe the effects of modern technology and capitalism on the psyche. Simmel argues that the hyper-

11. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 82.

stimulating sensory experience of the modern city, with its agglomeration of distant peoples, businesses, united from rural and urban, forces the urban subject to build a desensitized filter to cope with the overstimulation: the blasé outlook. Additionally, Simmel additionally argues that the modern metropolis, with a money economy at its heart, altered the perception of value and objects:

”To the extent that money, with its colourlessness and its indifferent quality, can become a common denominator of all values, it becomes the frightful leveller— it hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair.” (Simmel and Frisby 2004)

What might a text like *Metropolis and Mental Life* for the city of the parachute child read like? Consider these lyrics from Frank Ocean, who grew up only a hour’s drive away from the quiet opulence of Monterey Park:

”Too many bottles of this wine we can’t pronounce /
Too many bowls of that green, no lucky charms /
The maids come around too much /
Parents ain’t around enough /
Too many joy rides in daddy’s jaguar /
Too many white lies and white lines /
Super rich kids with nothing but loose ends
Super rich kids with nothing but fake friends”¹²

12. Ocean 2012.

At first, these lyrics could remind the observer of Zhou's mosaic of peculiar news stories about the "parachute kid" phenomenon, particularly of Te-Jen, a high schooler living with a caretaker in LA. He ran up \$500 monthly phone bills out of homesickness from being separated from his parents, and drives two cars for two different lives: his Mercedes-Benz for joyrides and his worn-out Oldsmobile for hanging out with friends, who are mostly unaware (for fear of theft) that he lives by himself. The 18-year-old Craig and 14-year-old Zeo, who live with an elderly servant in their large ranch house in San Marino are compensated in their physical and emotional separation from their transnational parents by way of a \$3,000 monthly allowance. And 16-year-old Gina is a parachute kid with a more extreme story: attempted murder and arson charges for building a setting off a bomb in her suburban Hacienda Heights home where she clashed with her host family relatives who attempted to apply "strict Chinese discipline."¹³

However, this decontextualized comparison paints parachute kids as universally vapid and troubled when in fact, parachute kids arrive in the United States through a similar ripple of overseas social contexts in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Additionally, the parachute kid life does not necessarily seem to be a life of wealth and hedonistic pleasure. Zhou reports that parachute kids tend to experience their life in the United States with an intense focus on education, holding clearly defined goals and self-awareness of their unique opportunity to obtain a prized education outside of their home country.¹⁴ Zhou's study of parachute kids' educational circumstances and experiences reveals a set of forces that shape the parachute kid's arrival to the United States: a history of educational exclusivity and setbacks such as the Cultural Revolution, resulting in intense competition for limited educational resources for secondary school

13. Zhou 2009, 203.

14. Zhou 2009, 217.

and higher education. Post-World War II social restructuring and industrialization in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China have slowly peeled back the barriers that previously prevented working-class children and women from entering the educational system. However in China, the Cultural Revolution resulted in major educational setbacks that lasted for decades.¹⁵

Additionally, political anxieties about Taiwan's relationship to the mainland, Hong Kong's uncertain future, and unpredictable Chinese government policy has caused many wealthy families to send their children abroad in order to secure their future away from these potential issues. According to Zhou, less than 10 percent of senior secondary school graduates in Hong Kong were accepted to a few accredited higher institutions of learning in the 1980s, and 34,000 students in Hong Kong went to the United States, Canada, and Australia to study— this figure is more than the 19,000 full-time students from Hong Kong's five major higher education institutions combined.¹⁶

The phenomenon of parachute kids remains interesting and relevant in the study of urbanism. These extreme stories of parachute kids should *never* be considered as wholly descriptive of the Chinese transnational community in Southern California— they should still be read by scholars as outlandish and extreme. However, the larger phenomenon of parachute kids is relevant in the study of Asian American urbanism because it shows the potential for the methodology of linking transnational social phenomena to larger legal, economic, and social forces both within the United States (in the form of student visas and loosened immigration laws) as well as outside of the United States (the emergence of a class of transnational, wealthy Chinese real estate entrepreneurs). Thus, asking similar questions should about the historical contexts of Asian American social

15. Zhou 2009, 204.

16. Zhou 2009, 205.

phenomena, including local and digital subcultures, yields rich layers of meaning and connection to Asian American and urban studies scholarship.

3.4 Spatial Dimensions of Identity

Consider the ethnoburb as one distinct epoch or site in a history of spatialized Asian American (Chinese) identity in the United States. In the study of ethnoburbs, scholars can identify a unique Asian American subjectivity tied to a distinct spatiality: the Chinese American parachute kid, well-monied and financially stable but isolated from their biological parents, straddling the line between cultural and national identities. We can perhaps observe in the case of the young Te-Jen, who drives two types of cars with distinct class associations for each, the ways in which young people display and express their identity through their consumption choices. But reading Zhou's analysis of parachute kids alone delivers an incomplete picture of how parachute kids experience transnational cultural phenomenon and urbanism; it seems unfair to draw the conclusion that parachute kids are only interested in school, even given their intense pressure to succeed as transnational subjects who arrive in the United States to acquire their education. What are other ways that distinct migration patterns to the United States, along with US urban space, namely middle-class post-World War II suburbia, give context to distinct Asian American transnational subjectivities? Although centering on a broad generalization of Asian American groups rather than solely the parachute kid, studies of subcultures and institutions of entertainment and leisure can provide clues. Entertainment in different urban spaces occupied by Asian Americans has taken various forms, serving as an important role in defining urban youth culture. Leisure and entertainment are fundamental ways that people enjoy urban space, and are highly

contested sites that hold symbolic and historical value. Since sites of entertainment are often sites where money flows, sites of entertainment and cultural activity have enormous value in their potential for investment and speculation. Considering the importance of entertainment activities in and between organized and informal structures, the next chapter explores how entertainment becomes a site of spatialized identity contestation via Asian American import subcultures.

Chapter 4

1980s: Asian American Auto Import

Subcultures

4.1 Historical and Cultural Contexts

In the 1980s and 1990s, a peculiar subculture emerged from southern California and the West Coast. I will refer to it as the *Asian American import subculture* to differentiate it from existing car subcultures such as African American and Latino auto subcultures, which held vastly contrasting aesthetics. It was steeped in a diasporic sensibility toward race and nationality, the transnational flow of niche consumer products, and a reinterpretation of a classic marker of American suburban identity: the automobile. Thus, this automobile subculture provides a powerful example of the intersection between US urban space, subculture, and Asian American identity.

The subversion of American automobile culture, which is rooted in US histories of automobile accommodation and consumer culture, gives this import subculture a very specific spatial and historical context. The meaning of life as a consumer citizen in the United States revolves the

production, consumption, usage, and maintenance of the American automobile. Rodriguez and Gonzalez note that the automobile served an important role in the early 20th century as a way to subdue and incorporate the working class, who were largely excluded from the enormous wealth extracted from their labor by capitalist factory owners.¹ The automobile became a periodizing technology that marked the United States' industrial transformation from Taylorism to Fordism, bringing with it a change of lifestyle for many citizens. Partially because of its ties to dominant ideological stances on the role of the citizen as consumer, the automobile has become a powerful symbol of US citizenship and inclusion, and can be identified as a tool which people manipulate and display in order to demonstrate their identity as American citizens.²

Through various entertainment media, the automobile has been painted as a symbol of White masculine strength and sexuality. The film trope of White men augmenting their sexual appeal with automobiles and winning car races in order to appeal to women proves an easy example. Other popular American film characters in works such as *Batman*, *Knight Rider*, and *The Dukes of Hazzard* show the extent to which White masculine identity has been linked with the automobile.³ Additionally, this automobile culture also builds off of an existing masculine cultural trope of the rugged cowboy roaming the American frontier, transposed to the highway as the new frontier for "a new kind of Mustang."⁴ The automobile also became a powerful symbol of American masculinity mediated through classed consumption and technological prowess. Leisurely car maintenance demonstrates a particular level of middle-class disposal income and leisure time, and allows men to demonstrate a level of individuality through their prowess with the mechan-

1. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 249.

2. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 250.

3. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 251.

4. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 215.

ical systems. The automobile is a symbol of masculine individualism despite the fact that it is based entirely on a mechanized, mass-produced system of production and consumption.

Spatially, the proliferation of the automobile is linked to national US policies which transformed American urban life and the built environment. The post-World War II state projects that called for the building of massive swaths of highways that both united and divided urban space, bringing together orderly stretches of blacktop to link once-distant metropolitan centers, while simultaneously destroying and splitting up already spatially segregated communities of color in slowly dissipating industrial centers. The automobile provided the vessel of transport for a new American spatial experience that expanded the social and geographic distance of the American worker's daily commute, with commercial centers and homes being reshaped and reconfigured to suit this new means of transport. Thus, these transformations paved the way for the development of the typology of the post-war suburb, previously highlighted as a key site for post-1965 Chinese American urban life as a result of the development of the ethnoburb.

4.2 Racialized Automobiles

In order to examine the ways that this auto subculture became a site where pan-Asian youth inscribed Asian American identity, we must begin a brief history of the introduction of Japanese automobiles into the United States auto market as well as the American cultural imaginary, as well as the ways that Asian identity was racialized through the metaphor of the Japanese automobile. Even in the realm of automobiles, Asianness was racialized through scripts that resembled attitudes that backed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Japanese automobile companies began to gain a significance during the 1970s and 1980s during strategic economic circumstances in the

United States, namely the oil crisis of the 1970s and a following recession. Because Japanese auto manufacturers could not replicate the Fordist production model due to the lack of manufacturing space, lack of large roadways, and natural resources, Japanese companies developed smaller automobiles that offered greater fuel economy and were able to be sold at lower prices due to their assembly in foreign countries that allowed less manufacturing regulation, cheap labor, and generally lower costs for auto manufacturing. Coinciding with a moment of Japanese international success in consumer technology industries, American companies launched "Buy American" campaigns that sought to wrestle back domestic auto sales from Japanese companies, which were portrayed as foreign invaders infringing on American market share. This xenophobic rhetoric was echoed in 1980 during a Senate Committee on Banking, House, and Urban Affairs meeting on the impact of Japanese imports on the US economy. During this meeting, Michigan senator Donald Riegle stated that "the administration seems to encourage the Japanese trade invasion" and observed that "America is hemorrhaging jobs and capital at an enormous cost to our Nation." Like the sentiments of Chinese exclusion during the 19th century, this wave of anti-Japanese sentiment stemming from the auto industry escalated to anti-Asian violence, in the example of the infamous 1982 murder of Vincent Chin. Although Vincent Chin was Chinese American, he was murdered as a result of anti-Japanese sentiment among White auto workers, who felt threatened by the rhetoric of Japanese industrial invasion that was touted by auto companies.

However, it would be incorrect to portray the rise of Japanese auto manufacturing as the sole cause for the decline of US auto manufacturing. US auto companies played a major role in the demise of domestic auto manufacturing, by increasing the automation of various manufacturing processes, as well as the relocation of auto manufacturing jobs to other locales and nations. Thus,

the historical images of Asians as perpetual foreigners as well as the "yellow peril" set a powerful backdrop for the ways that race became coded into the landscape of American car culture.

4.3 Pan-Asianism Through Transnational Japaneseness

My aim is to highlight spatial context in relation to the construction of a pan-Asian American cultural sensibility; thus, it is important to highlight Asian import subculture as a derivative of pre-existing Mexican American lowrider subcultures. Perhaps providing the foundation for import subcultures' racialized aesthetic maneuvers, lowrider subculture reappropriated and subverted existing American dominant automobile aesthetics to synthesize a distinctly Mexican American brand of cultural hybridity and Americanness. As a response to dominant White middle-class auto culture, lowrider subcultures aimed to offend middle class White car culture through car modifications that pushed the boundaries of "good taste:" extremely low hanging suspension systems and bouncing hydraulics being two particularly iconic images of Mexican American lowriders.⁵ Additionally, this lowrider subculture had pragmatic roots in lower income communities who needed to develop their own self-maintenance skills in order to service their cars by themselves— a marginal experience compared to the dominant image of car ownership as a well-monied practice of consumer citizenship.⁶

In the xenophobic political and economic landscape of the 1980s, buying Japanese cars became a symbol of betrayal to the US nation-state. With this political maneuvering in mind, the Asian American import subcultures emerged from the Mexican American lowrider subcultures, substituting large American cars such as Cadillac DeVilles and Chevrolet Monte Carlos with smaller

5. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 254.

6. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 254.

Japanese cars such as Hondas, Toyotas and Mitsubishi's. During the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese automobiles took on other characteristics that were used to racialize Asian groups in the United States. As Asian American auto subcultures wrestled with racial meanings embedded into the Japanese car, the Asian American import subculture simultaneously was a contestation of Asian American racialization, with cars as stand-ins for racialized bodies. The Japanese car was seen as utilitarian, cheap, weak, and technically inferior in comparison to the American cars, which tended to have larger engines and heavier frames. The Filipino import team Flipspeed was perhaps aware of these racial undertones, describing the streets and the racetrack as a site where "some of our cars are there pretty much every Friday night, showing the V-8 boys that we're not just little rice rockets with nitrous systems."⁷ Additionally, Rodriguez and Gonzalez note that these Filipino racers also subverted racialized stereotypes of "the bad Asian driver" as well as the suburban White DIY technical know-how of dominant American car culture by demonstrating their racing prowess as well as their self-made engineering modifications that would allow R.J. de Vera, a Filipino American import scene star to proclaim, "A Mustang 5.0 would rev me at the light, and I would smoke 'em[.]"⁸

The characteristic performance and design of Japanese imports called for unique sets of modifications that stood in great contrast to American car modding, and that visually evoked a sense of pan-Asian affinity through visual references to Japanese auto manufacturers. Even though import teams tended along ethnic lines, such as the Filipino team Flipspeed mentioned earlier, capital flows and the general visuality of the pan-Asian import car was rooted in Japanese auto corporations and Japanese aesthetics, as described by Rodriguez and Gonzalez. The choice of

7. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 256.

8. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 256.

Japanese cars was not necessarily a political decision made by members of the Asian American import subculture; instead, Japanese cars offered lower prices than European or domestic US cars. The link to globalized Japaneseness is beyond just brand associations— a very specific image of Japaneseness is projected through stylings and visual references: Rodriguez and Gonzalez use the Japanese anime trope of the mecha pilot to illustrate the ways that import scene participants attempted to claim superiority in their technical prowess, thus addressing the tradition of dominant car culture, to the point of referencing and projecting a hyperfuturistic modern sensibility tied to global Japanese corporate success.⁹ The import driver projects the Japanese traditional masculine icon of the samurai fused with the futuristic superhuman sensibility of the mecha pilot, surrounded in a nest of vibrant, incomprehensibly advanced technology. The display of technological prowess in the Asian American import subculture is taken to another extreme beyond meticulous performance tuning: the display of cutting-edge car audio, high end amplifiers, computer-controlled electronics, in-car televisions, and other seemingly frivolous technologies evokes a fascination with and association with an image of Japan as a world power in a modern, extravagant, and deeply consumerist mode.¹⁰ However, Rodriguez and Gonzalez read additional meanings in the import subcultures' affinity with Japaneseness. The scene's preference for aerodynamic sleek forms, clean lines, and a sense of functionalism is a demonstration of affinity for Japanese traditional aesthetics.¹¹

Thus, Japanese pop culture references become the media through which Asian import drivers project their responses to the racialization of Asian American men in the United States. Oddly enough, Japanese pop culture and products of Japanese national origin, become embedded into

9. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 260.

10. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 256.

11. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 257.

the fabric of what it means to be Asian American in this subculture. The visuality of a globalized Japanese pop culture and its relationship to 2000s Asian American identity is an emergent pattern that should not be underestimated in future studies of Asian American pop culture.

4.4 Limits of Subversive Potential

Subcultural does not always mean *counter*-cultural. Ultimately, these import subcultures encourage a type of corporately mediated consumption linked to pleasure, the racialized objectification of Asian women, and arguably, the ideological expansion of the automobile into the realm of everyday pleasure and sport. For post 1980s to 2000s Asian American men along the West Coast, the Asian import car subculture appears to be an avenue to project a potentially subversive brand of Asian American identity— although this is limited to men who have the time and resources to select, purchase, install, and personalize expensive Japanese import parts. Women often play a marginal part in many of these subcultures. Additionally, this response to the racialization of Asian Americans is not necessarily a just response for Asian American women, who are relegated to the margins of this subculture as merely sexual icons and competition trophies. Instead of providing a space where women are able to assert their own citizenship and inclusion into the American automobile state, womens' bodies are hypersexualized, modified, and exposed in the same way that import cars at shows are displayed and fetishized.¹²

12. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 266.

4.5 Mediated Spatiality

I have shown that the import subculture scene is built on top of a historical foundation that generated a distinct space of which the import scene stems from. The scene cannot be separated from the history of the United States as an automobile-reliant nation that poured enormous amounts of money and labor into reconfiguring the transportation infrastructure of the nation and encouraged a particular consumerism and racialized gendering of White men through the proliferation of mainstream car culture. Additionally, this dominant car culture history is the backdrop of the Mexican American import subculture from which the Asian import car scene was a derivative of. Although the space of the ethnoburb, the car tuning garage, the suburban garage, or at least the American highway, can all be imagined as spaces that house the import subculture phenomenon, digital media presents a peculiar hypothetical situation. How do we categorize and understand the spatio-temporality of the digital media representations of import subculture that are arguably deeply significant in the flow of goods, recruitment and "education" of prospective enthusiasts, and the sharing of writing of a history, mythology, textuality, and sense of transnational, transpatial community? In other words, what implications does digital media have on urban space, identity, and transnationalism if the postwar ethnic suburb *and* the large swath of Internet publications, forums and social media networks are both spaces where these three disciplinary themes are produced, magnified, and transformed?

But the Asian import subculture also relies on various multimedia (thus, the imagination) in order to thrive and reach large audiences. Even as digital media extends a certain level of popularity, exposure, and knowability, the "subcultural" nature of this scene is produced and extended through its proliferation through media, as the textuality of the Internet emphasizes and assists in

defining a special code and language that extends existing jargon of car engineering. Rodriguez and Gonzalez note that the import subculture is proliferated through online publications that provide information and news that hold together both an imagined and real community of import enthusiasts. They argue that these Web publication enmesh members together in imagined community formations that extend existing transnational circuits of capital and culture. Not only does corporate power exist in the production, marketing, and distribution of car parts, businesses such as car part companies are directly involved as sponsors of some of these Web publications, demonstrating the way that these networked subcultural communities are directly intertwined with the forces of transnational capitalism.¹³

The combination of digital media, the overwhelming audience of a pan-Asian American identifications, and transnational (Japanese) forces project a curious potential for the present contemporary moment in Asian American racial formation, as well as possible futures of changing relationship between the interplay between urban space, identity, and the transnational forces. This subculture subverted an American icon by forging from it a diasporic sense of ethnic and racial identity. Rooted in the consumption of Japanese goods, and even became recognized and legitimized by these transnational corporations. This subculture was additionally an example of Asian American men making a claim to American citizenship and belonging by appropriating the space of the American highway and road while also navigating and deploying specific codes of gender in response to the racialization of Asian men in the United States.

If scholars recognize Internet subcultures such as netlabels as a frontier for an emergent type of Asian American urbanism, is the idea of "spatial practice" as a subject of study still relevant in the study of Asian American Internet subculture? After all, the Internet is perhaps the ultimate

13. Rodriguez and Gonzalez 2007, 261.

realization of the postmodern city. The Internet compresses and destroys time and space in a way that creates peculiar juxtapositions of people and cultures that surpass the odd hybridities and emergent lifestyles of Asian Americans that were formerly rooted in physical, spatial terrain. If Asian Americans are connecting to each other through the imaginary fields of the Internet rather than in the physical spaces of homes, cafes, parking garages, and streets, are there still "spaces" for scholars to examine, in the traditional sense of the term? The abstraction of "cloud computing" as a popular spatial model for understanding the Internet is deeply misleading because it attempts to abstract away the mortal, physical hardware and spatial requirements of the Internet: for example, networking cables that range from trans-neighborhood to transcontinental. Even on the scale of individual human bodies, the abstraction of "the cloud" draws attention away from the physical environs of the Internet user. However, the physical constraints of computing prove that society has not yet reached a "post-spatial" paradigm in the way that the production of culture is intertwined with spatial realities, and the historical, sociopolitical forces that produce spatialities. The following chapter will explore this dynamic between physical and digital by examining a digital space and situating it sociopolitically within suburban Southern California.

Chapter 5

2009 to Beyond: Zoom Lens Label

5.1 Hyperlinking from the Ethnoburb to Digital Culture

This chapter departs from the sites of the post-1965 ethnoburbs of Southern California and the generalized suburban West Coast auto scene of the late 1900s. In the spirit of reckoning with the postmodern, hyperaccelerationist chaos enabled by transnational Internet linkages, we will now hyperlink ourselves to the "space" of the Internet netlabel of the 2000s and 2010s. Internet music is a site deeply embedded in experimental, uncanny, sometimes jarring linkages and collages of time, space, and cultural signifiers.¹ I argue that these Internet linkages and subcultures are a curious evolution from Wei Li's ethnoburb as a site of "international geopolitical and global economic restructuring, changing national immigration and trade policies and local demographic, economic, and political contexts" which enriched many American postwar suburbs with a deeper level of multicultural and multiracial influence— particularly East Asian influences.²

Thus, consider the following observation from Park and Leong in the introductory section of Am-

1. Harper 2017, 86.

2. Park and Leong 2008, ix.

erasia 2008, whose theme pivoted from the central question, "How Do Asian Americans Create Places?"

"[...]just as Los Angeles is seen as the production of simulated metropolis, Asian American spaces such as Koreatown increasingly speak to what Jean Baudrillard (1988) has called "hyperreality" or "post-modern" urban space, a perfect example of "depthlessness and spectacle" (see Edward Soja, 1989, 1997), where neoliberal zones are disconnected from the streetscape."³

Park and Leong are specifically referring to the ways that the pre-ethnoburb ethnic enclave became gentrified and became a site of outsider consumption. However, I am interested in the ways Internet linkages might be able to add an infinite layer of depth to the enclave in both real and imaginary ways. Although Zoom Lens and this survey of the *diasporic netlabel* phenomenon are not necessarily identified with specific ethnic sites such as Koreatowns, Japantowns, or even Chinatowns, I attempt to establish a connection between Zoom Lens as an Internet subculture and its relationship to the larger U.S. racial/urban landscape and transnational forces. This connection offers an example of a way that Internet subcultures be related to urban space contrary to their assertions of anti-urban digital nomadism, while also being potential avenues through which transnational linkages become intensified. In simpler words, what ways could the ethnoburb or "ethnic urban site" produce various digital subcultures, and what might it mean if a class of subcultural adherents— such as members and followers of an Internet subculture like Zoom Lens— redirect capital flows and activities?

3. Park and Leong 2008, viii.

I will describe Zoom Lens and their contemporaries as writers of subcultural digital spaces that are *not necessarily identified as Asian American*, but regardless seem to echo a post-modern transnational sensibility, sometimes projecting a racially subversive ethos that resonates as a continuation of the spatial practices and transnational linkages of the Asian auto import subcultures profiled in the previous chapter. This will assist in springboarding the discussion into a speculation about the relationship between the state-sanctioned, corporate mediation of space, the pan-ethnic Asian American identities produced from these spaces, and the theorizing of transnationalism's relationship with digital culture. We begin profiling the netlabel by suggesting Zoom Lens as an archetypical example of an evolution on the late 2000s netlabel. The following question serves as a frame for my analysis of Zoom Lens through the lens of Asian American urbanisms: Where might the subcultural spaces of an emergent Asian American 2010s subcultural consciousness be located, and what forces might be responsible in shaping them?

Zoom Lens is an excellent starting point for speculating about the production of culture in diasporic spaces like the post-ethnoburb. Zoom Lens' brand is distinctly suburban and diasporic despite their embrace of spatially nomadic hypermedia. In fact, I argue that their "real" urban context and coded diasporic sensibility may actually serve as a marker toward a more transnationally and subculturally-aware study of 2000s Asian American spatial practice. Through their music and online presence, Zoom Lens projects unique readings and syntheses of Japanese popular culture, 1990's nostalgia, the avant-garde, and suburban nu-metal, all of which culminate in a distinct "punk rock" attitude that selectively interprets and contests the meaning of "punk rock" against the racially marginalizing backdrop the US sociopolitical landscape. Racial marginalization is a tool that pushes subordinated racial groups to contest their inclusion into the US nation-state, as noted in Gonzalez and Rodriguez's study of Asian import subcultures. Thus, Zoom Lens' tem-

plate for a digital diasporic sensibility can be read as part of an emergent transcultural space that seems to echo Anzaldúa's concept of the borderlands as existing between national borders. I will describe the contexts of Zoom Lens' unique image and argue that a combination of transnational multidirectional influence, diasporic sensibility, and suburban marginality are key parts of Zoom Lens' evolution of the netlabel.

5.2 From bloodstained CD's to ephemeral MP3s

Zoom Lens is a netlabel founded in 2009 by a young fourth and fifth generation Chinese and Japanese American person named Garrett Yim who performs as the artist Meishi Smile.⁴ Originating in Orange County, Zoom Lens arose out of a similar built environment and urban context as the post-1965 ethnoburb. Zoom Lens label arose from an experimental music scene of Orange County that was home to various noise music acts networked through social media platforms of the late 2000s such as MySpace, a platform that would quickly dissolve out of popular use due to the rise of other social networking services (SNS) platforms useful for subcultural congregation such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. The storytelling of Zoom Lens as a stand-in for the quintessential netlabel reflects the same arc that I am arguing in the broad scope of this thesis: First, the conceptual music label phenomenon thrived via person-to-person networks where digital media was proliferated through physical media such as Compact Disc, cassette, and vinyl. Yim attests to this in Thomas's interview for Red Bull Music Academy,⁵ "People ran their own labels. I say label in the loosest sense of the word. The releases exchanged were scribbled blank CD-Rs

4. Le, R 2016.

5. The Red Bull Music Academy is a brand of the Red Bull drink company that expands the Red Bull brand into the world of independent music by sponsoring various international concerts and creating their own platform for media coverage in order to promote up-and-coming artists.

burnt hot off a laptop.”⁶ Zoom Lens was created to host a variety of music acts in its early days, with the experimental noise act *Yuko Imada* being a primary project that helps us identify Zoom Lens’ suburban, subcultural context.

Zoom Lens’ activities did not seem to be limited to merely music distribution, even in its early days of the late 2000’s. The Zoom Lens Vimeo account hosts a handful of early Yuko Imada footage: dark, hazy video of Yuko Imada performing loud, grating sound textures that recall the extreme sonic antics of “Japanoise—” extreme Japanese experimental noise music— directly cited as Yim’s early musical influences.⁷ This video footage was filmed at the Orange County Center For Contemporary Art (OCCCA) during an event called the *Santa Ana Noise Festival III, Third Annual Extreme Noise & Experimental Music Festival* held in the winter of 2011. If we consider these early noise music performances at a venue such as the OCCCA as examples of spatial practice, Zoom Lens was initially deeply rooted in the suburban Orange County experimental music subculture, sharing space with other experimental noise musicians within established community cultural institutions such as the OCCCA.

Another example of the way that Zoom Lens embraced physicality in its early days was through an extreme release, Yuko Imada’s first album was packaged with a “cryptic letter that had been soaked in my own blood.”⁸ Michal Palmer, who plays in a label band called the Bilinda Butchers and was a Zoom Lens staff member alongside Yim, uses label release media as components of a generational youth culture:

”Being of mostly digital age I’m sick and tired of nostalgists over-sentimentalizing analogue formats. And to be clear I love vinyl and cassette and using analogue equip-

6. Thomas 2014.

7. Thomas 2014.

8. Thomas 2014.

ment but I don't feel a strong connection. *People like Garrett and I are computer kids and we want to embrace that aspect of our lives into more than just our daily tasks but our music, art, and aesthetics in our own personal lives, as well as our label.*"⁹

(Emphasis added by author)

5.3 "I live on the Internet, but Tokyo is *real life*"

This heading derives from a comment left by Meishi Smile on a Maltine Records YouTube video from 2014 that depicts concert footage of the 2014 Maltine Records anniversary event in Tokyo.¹⁰

¹¹ This quote, written around 5 years after the founding of Zoom Lens, respatializes the label and Meishi Smile's relationship with community and space. In the same 2014 *The Fader* interview by Harper, Yim's interpretations complicates Palmer's description earlier of the label by revealing a sentimentality for the physical release but hinting at a inevitable gravitation toward the digital:

"I feel like the existence of physical items is important in preserving our own attached memories to such listening experiences, yet sometimes I feel like it's impractical in an ecological sense and is slowly growing less acceptable for the shifting musical listening trends. [...] We are in constant conflict in losing the physical things that bring us a sense of connection, yet we enjoy the ease of instant gratification."¹²

Although Yim attests to the physical origins of Zoom Lens in many interviews, the discussion of identity and urban-spatial groundings of this intensity and specificity are surprising and

9. Harper 2014.

10. MeishiSmile 2014.

11. Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase assisted in this translation, suggesting an alternative translation of "I live on the Internet, but Tokyo is where I live in reality." I use the former translation to contrast with the Zoom Lens motto, "Fuck Real Life."

12. Harper 2014.

unexpected in the world of netlabels as a whole. Zoom Lens is undeniably visible and rich in a way that is exceptional compared to other netlabels. In example, one can easily find other netlabels on hubs of free/libre Creative Commons music material that deny or lack this sense of spatial identification. "Netlabels" are a strong feature of the audio section of the Internet Archive website as well as on Bandcamp, where hundreds upon hundreds of netlabels upload their music and artwork. In some cases, these netlabels offer a single place of origin such as Boston, MA; Helsinki, Finland; Philadelphia, PA. But since many netlabels appear to be merely small groups of individuals who operate netlabels from their personal computers, there is little press coverage and literature to give rich description and context to these smaller labels, heightening the imagined experience of the netlabel listener by providing a blank canvas upon which listeners can project their own fantasies and curiosities upon. The extreme mystery and obscurity of the netlabel (and Internet music subcultures in general) seems to give a deep sense of authenticity and subcultural capital for participants.

This is especially salient in a culture and world where privacy and surveillance is hypersaturated in the lives and media of the networked citizen. Thus, tapping into the unknown is particularly salient in a world where networked technologies enable the processing of social networks—a domain previously thought to be imbued with an intangible human essence. In this historical moment, remote sensing and publicly accessible mapping technologies are able to efficiently detect and survey both the built and natural environment and cultural landscape (analysis and indexing of multimedia through advanced search and automated curation) and provide popular knowledge to an extent previously impossible. Thus, the practice of enjoying obscure Internet music should be situated in an entertainment culture where "the unknown" and by subtext, the subcultural seems to become whittled away by automated technologies.

5.4 Borderlands as "Digital Punk Rock Spirit"

I will use the term *cultural interpolation* to describe an anti-essentialist reading of the way that Asian American subjectivity and a transnational Japaneseness is contested and becomes coded in the identity of Zoom Lens— but *interpolated* through Japanese transnational subcultures. Otaku subcultures, a cultural phenomena sometimes coded as foreign or imported yet not genuinely "Japanese" in the traditional, culturally nativist sense. In the field of digital video encoding, *frame interpolation* is a technique in which sophisticated motion data processing algorithms are used to automatically calculate in-between video frames and generate video footage at higher frame rates than their original sources. *Interpolation* is an appropriate word to describe the ways that individuals reappropriate meanings and write themselves into a sense of ethnic belonging through transnational forces and in ways that challenge the nativist/assimilationist binary. *Interpolation* emphasizes the in-betweenness, the subjectivity of being between tenuously situated and Othered between different borderlands and nation-building projects that attempt to viscerally delineate cultural borders. I argue that cultural interpolation is a key element of this transnationalist Asian diasporic subjectivity. I use the term transnational not merely to refer to things that cross in and between national borders, but to emphasize the socio-historical context of global economic restructuring and postwar Japanese economic and cultural influence that was identified in Rodriguez and Gonzalez's survey of import subcultures. Although engaging in very different modes of marginality, media, and space than that of Asia import subcultures, Zoom Lens' version of Asian American diasporic suburban subjectivity is shaped by the same transnational Japanese forces and the same US racial landscape.

To begin my analysis of the ways the United States racial landscape has shaped Zoom Lens' identity, consider Anzaldúa's classic description of the space of "the borderlands" situated as an inherently hybrid space— a scar bled from the injustice and dominance of nation.

"The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, go through the confines of the "normal."¹³

It is important to note that my reading of the borderlands does not glance over the obvious racial and geopolitical differences between the US/Japanese national border and the US/Mexican border. But I argue it is necessary and deeply productive to explore the marginalization that Zoom Lens attempts to speak to, in order to grasp this powerful and peculiar diasporic sensibility that Zoom Lens potentializes.

13. Anzaldúa 1987, 3.

5.5 J-Pop As Punk Rock: Subversive Positionings of Transnational Subculture

Lowe's critique of the nativist/assimilationist binary constructed within Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* helps us delineate the interpolated borderlands that Zoom Lens occupies. *Eat a Bowl of Tea*'s Ben Loy, the man at both the center of the narrative and the diasporic position of Chinese and American, is portrayed with two opposite tensions as metaphors for paradigms of identity development. On one side is the nativist construction, in which marrying the "nice Chinese girl" and submitting to filial piety through obeying his father symbolizes an alignment with a specific construction of Chinese identity. On the other hand is the assimilationist path, in which Loy solicits gratification from American sex workers and partakes in gambling. This identifies unconstrained sexual desire, pleasure, and lack of self-discipline as an extreme example of American assimilation.¹⁴ This mood of classic Asian American, ethno-diasporic themes of identity serves as the backdrop for the peculiar way that Zoom Lens constructs Asianness by interpolating a unique identity from between the confines of suburban America and the influence of Japanese transnational cultural elements.

Yim's personal biography as an artist via Meishi Smile and Yuko Imada as told through interviews provides a vivid illustration of this *cultural interpolation* phenomenon.

"Much of my music and the identity I've established with Zoom Lens stems from my place as a fourth generation Japanese/Chinese American. When I grew up I was too Asian for the Caucasian kids, much too "white-washed" for the Asian kids. My identity was very unique, at times lonely. My only lasting close friend throughout school

14. Lowe 1991, 34.

was Alex of Malta. We connected over music and he was the one who introduced me to an anime called *FLCL*. *Through FLCL I began to identify more with the popular culture aspects of Japan and connected to that sort of outsider mentality, as anime and Japanese music were still very obscure interests back then. It was like J-Pop was my punk rock.*" (Emphasis added by author)¹⁵

J-Pop and otaku subcultures are often written off as powerful symbols of corporate consumerism. I emphasize the final sentences in order to ask the following question: What circumstances might allow Yim to interpolate J-Pop and the otaku into symbols of anti-establishment and self-definition?

In the case of Yim, the dichotomy between pop and punk is inverted. Although Zoom Lens initially thrived in the countercultural Los Angeles experimental noise scene, Yim observed the reconstruction of superiority complexes, dominance, and marginalization even within a subculture that purported to be accepting and border-shifting,

"As much as people like that want to say they're being so subversive and in a sense, subversive being "very open-minded to a lot of different things," they would always dismiss that music. They'd say, 'Oh, this belongs on the radio... this belongs... this place, or this place' [...] I was like, well... I'm making what I consider pop music even though it has elements of noise— all these other experimental elements[...] But nobody really understood it. So I had to really break off from that, and that's why I started Zoom Lens, and started releasing my own music by myself and just trying to branch out and meet other people."¹⁶

15. Thomas 2014.

16. Le, R 2016.

The Zoom Lens Web site describes the label as "a label of digital punks set to collapse the binary between pop & experimental music." This quote is contextualized by identifying a peculiar type of marginalization and alienation from the Orange County noise music scene exposed by Yim's association with Japanese transnational popular culture elements like J-Pop. Thus, it is within both the hegemonic forces of the Orange County experimental music subculture and the subcultural status *and* associated stigmas of Japanese pop cultural aspects that Yim delineates Zoom Lens' counterhegemonic ethos.

Zoom Lens also blossomed simultaneously with another series of subcultural art movements, such as *vaporwave* and *seapunk*, both of which exploit techno-kitsch symbols as ironic embrace or critique of late capitalist eighties and nineties computer graphics. Some commentators have used Said's Orientalism to argue the ways that vaporwave both reassures and critiques "Western" capitalism through portraying a dystopian, nondescript East Asian dystopian cityscapes of consumption.¹⁷ Additionally, Zoom Lens lives in the same era during which this aesthetic has become commercialized by corporations such as MTV, appropriated from the digital subterranean to become tools to market a sense of freshness geared toward contemporary young adult audiences.¹⁸ As a cultural mediator and commentator on East Asian popular culture and music for an English-language Internet audience, Zoom Lens also potentially exists as a curator of the techno-Orientalisms of vaporwave. Readings of Zoom Lens' various projects, maneuvers, and works in the future will offer rich readings of the ways that Zoom Lens has benefited from Internet fascination over vaporwave as well as what ways has and will Zoom Lens and their projects attempt to redirect the gazes their audience of Internet denizens— some of whom engage in the discourses

17. Lin, Brent 2017.

18. LOKI 2016.

of vaporwave and other art styles that appropriate and homogenize transnational Asianness in an Orientalist manner.

Yim's own biography as well as its diffusion into the racial coding of Zoom Lens extends a niche history of Japanese and Asian American work that has echoed this sense of both generational marginality and conflict with the nativist/assimilationist readings of Asian American identity. Although the 1987 Steven Okazaki narrative film *Living on Tokyo Time* is not unique in describing what Ling and Austin describe as "generation gap" narratives, what makes *Living on Tokyo Time* a resonant piece of work is the way that the main character Ken, a diasporic Japanese American deadbeat musician living in 1980's San Francisco, challenges ethno-cultural nativism with 1980s punk rock.¹⁹ Ken and the green card-seeking Japanese-national love interest Kiyoko become metaphors on both sides of Lowe's assimilationist/nativist dynamic. As an Asian American diasporic and marginalized subject, Ken identifies with punk rock in opposition to a nativist narrative of Japaneseness that involves an appreciation for Japanese food and being able to speak the Japanese language. But even as Ken seeks agency and self-identification through punk rock, Okazaki closes the film with a dialogue that reveals the realm of American rock music as a force fraught with anti-Asian racism. Thus, even the countercultural tendencies of 1980's punk rock remains an exclusionary space, failing to include the Asian American subject within the US nation-state via cultural exclusion.

Ken: You should become a musician. One-hit record, and you got it made.

Lambert: You're not as smart as you look. How many Asians you know with hit records?

19. Ling and Austin 2015, 44.

Ken: Well... you could be the first.²⁰

Therefore, this juxtaposition of Zoom Lens' counterhegemonic ethos with Okazaki's 1987 film and connects Zoom Lens to a preexisting but underexplored niche in Asian American cultural studies and urbanism. Yim's statement about Zoom Lens echoes the cultural marginalization of Asian Americans even within countercultural spaces, but is amplified by the expansion and international notoriety and success of both Japanese popular and Japanese niche subcultural media. This historical connection provides a rich and complex reading of Zoom Lens' "Digital Punk Rock Spirit" as a way that an "alt" Asianness can become coded in ways that are less explicit than predecessors of "alt-Asianness," and transformed by transnational influences. In a perhaps more recent example, Mimi Thi Nguyen's 1997 *Evolution of a Race Riot* zine gives an example of a work that spoke to the positioning of Asian Americans between and against alt and punk subcultures.

"And in the end I have no desire myself to redeem punk rock: I've ditched that alb-tross from around my neck, thanks much. Three years ago when I began soliciting for this compilation, I was nearing the end of my punk rock epoch but still invested in it. No longer, after three long years. I'm over it like I'm over puberty, like I'm over ripped fishnets and barracudas and Asian fetishes. Bad memories include: racism, sexism, homophobia, and metaphorical rapes on both paper and vinyl. I have more important battles to wage in more important arenas. So I'm doing the subcultural limbo and that's all right with me."²¹

20. Okazaki 1987.

21. Nguyen 1997, 6.

Thus, in a similar way that Mimi Nguyen sought to distance herself from the marginalizing force of punk rock, Zoom Lens can be read as a distancing from the "punk rock" of Orange County experimental music.

5.6 Zoom Lens' Transnational Japaneseness through Otaku Subcultures

In this section, I briefly give context to the term *otaku* in order to attach its meaning to the construction of Zoom Lens' brand of diasporic marginality. One of the ways that a transnational diasporic Japaneseness and Asianness is identified in the Zoom Lens culture is the label's deep influence from Japanese otaku subcultures.

"Otaku culture" is described by the cultural critic Hiroki Azuma as those who engage in subcultures related to anime, video games, manga, computers, science fiction, and the like.²² Recall the words "instant gratification" which Yim used to describe Zoom Lens' reaction to the media zeitgeist. This choice of words conjures up primal instincts and reminds us of Azuma's notion of the "animalization of otaku culture" in which mind control through affectual cultural devices plays a key role.²³ In contrast to the modern world being organized by grand narratives and ideology, Azuma posited the *databasification* of the world in which grand narratives became obsolete, giving way to the emphasis on constructed "small narratives." Thus, databasification involves a level of subjective individualistic experience for the *otaku* that relies on their fixation on smaller

22. Azuma 2009, 3.

23. Azuma, Furuhata, and Steinberg 2007, 178.

details of a work: "Depending on what parts of the world are inputted, people may grasp any number of small world-images."²⁴

Writing in the early 2000's on what was then an emergent phenomenon as well as a time that various Zoom Lens label members allude to in prior interviews as deeply influential to their sensibilities, Azuma periodizes consumption of Japanese manga and anime into the modern and postmodern eras according to his model of grand narrative vs. database.

"Michal: Samurai Champloo, Neon Genesis Evangelion, Akira

Pedro: K-On as a whole is extremely important to me and some other favorites are the Macross series, Kino's Journey, Haibane Renmei and Card Captor Sakura. The latter of which, looking back, was really important to my growth as a person and establishing my tastes and stuff. I feel like it goes without saying for people our age that Toonami was really important to us growing up too."²⁵

The modern era of *otaku* culture from 1980 to 1995 favored the consumption of grand narratives primarily via manga and anime; for example, Azuma cites *Gundam* as an example of a series of works that presented "small narratives" of which allowed the consumer to project a "grand narrative" world from the background of the smaller narratives.²⁶ In contrast, during the postmodern world after 1995, Azuma analyzes the emergent media of interactive fiction as emblematic of the database model that overtook grand narratives, noting that "interactive novel" genre games became a primary focus in *otaku* culture after 1995. In an interactive fiction game, players read text that accompany illustrations. By choosing various options throughout the course of the game,

24. Azuma, Furuhashi, and Steinberg 2007, 180.

25. KDVS 2014.

26. Azuma, Furuhashi, and Steinberg 2007, 183.

they navigate various alternative endings and scenarios. The database consists of affectual settings and other elements within the game, and players selectively assemble "small narratives" from this database as they please, sometimes creating visualizations of the games' multiple paths. These visualizations are then used in derivative fan works that can be manipulated and reappropriated beyond the intentions of the original creators. Thus, Azuma argues that otakus analyze these works and create data structures and models that represent the sets and elements in these intellectual properties (IP), of which they isolate affectual elements (character traits such as cuteness or personalities, or even images themselves) of which they can form communities around. Azuma spatializes this otaku phenomena by culminating these activities in the site of the otaku convention— digital space via the Internet, and the built environment via comic conventions such as Comiket.²⁷

It is important to remember that the sense of Japaneseness that Zoom Lens tends to project is relatively niche and in some cases taboo. In 2014, Meishi Smile collaborated with a Dutch artist named Eno Swinnen and glitch artist Joes Roosens, who created a music video for the song *Honey* that visually and textually references a subgenre of erotic dating simulation interactive fiction games. The video is a complex discursive maneuver, as it both seems to appeal to fans of this subset of otaku subculture by indulging in these subcultural affects. But the video simultaneously delivers a critique of the unsettling power of the "male gaze" to objectify the feminized body, perhaps to an audience seduced via bait-and-switch. The video accomplishes this via rotoscoped pencil drawings of various feminized, unnamed Japanese anime and manga-styled characters who are voluptuously depicted with various intersecting planes that both hide, reveal,

27. Azuma, Furuhashi, and Steinberg 2007, 185.

and decontextualize contours and shapes of various body parts such as breasts, hips, the mouth, eyes, legs, etc.²⁸

Although applied specifically to otaku, Hiroki's notion of data collection and arbitrary assemblage as derivative works seems to resonate with the ways that the Internet has enabled a type of mass subcultural production that was previously invisible. Hiroki's theory about databasification perhaps sheds light on Zoom Lens its association of Japanese otaku subcultures with a subversiveness articulated through East Asian affinities. Hiroki's database theory may reveal the logics behind these rather obscure transnational linkages: "The Internet is but one vast database in which appears any number of worlds that differ depending on input."²⁹

I am suggesting that these *inputs* are a combination of Asian American diasporic sensibilities, juxtaposed with the reality of White supremacist American suburbia and further interpolated through the shortcomings and eliteness of the Orange County music scene that propelled Yim to unflinchingly helm Meishi Smile as an experimental pop project. There seems to be an emergent bridge between the relationship between Hiroki's otaku subjectivity and with Asian American media scholar Lisa Nakamura's observations about the Internet as a site of cultural production for Asian Americans:

"[...]New media's potential when it comes to Asian Americans has much to do with the powerful ways in which it deploys interactivity to destabilize the distinctions between users and producer, as well as distinctions which serve to rigidify notions of what Asian American authenticity consists of."³⁰

28. urbancraft 2014.

29. Azuma, Furuhata, and Steinberg 2007, 181.

30. Nakamura et al. 2005, 263.

Mark Redito, another musician closely affiliated with but who is not directly part of Zoom Lens, has attempted to overwrite the hypermasculinity of the Asian American import subculture through derivative works of Japanese manga. He employs illustrations of feminine figures perched on their import cars to promote his club space *Likido*, planned to be a party scene for queer youth, people of color, and women.³¹ In these illustrations, Redito also echoes influence from a Japanese transnational product: the manga series *Initial D*, of which the *Likido* illustrations allude to and subvert. In *Initial D*, the young protagonist men stand in front of their cars as if displaying their steeds, reflecting their identity in their choice of automobile. *Likido*'s visual cue disrupts this continuity by offering other genders a place to drift on the roads and claim driverhood and center stage.

Zoom Lens began with a particularly powerful spatial grounding in the Orange County experimental music scene as well as the archetype of the predominantly White suburban United States. Although clearly identified as a Los Angeles label through their website marketing copy and in interview materials, Zoom Lens quickly shifted to become an iconic *netlabel* with a powerful and unique presence and sensibility toward digital culture. Their tagline seeks to transcend physicality, almost embodying a cyborg sentimentality: "We are a collective of musicians. Humanity across the digital divide. Digital punk rock spirit. Fuck real life."³²

The phrasing of "humanity across the digital divide" can be located as two references: a youth culture affinity for digital media and the Internet (a similar embrace of the Internet that enabled the music community surrounding Yuko Imada) as well as a possible influence from the Japanese electropop music project Genki Rockets. Genki Rockets was a 2006 audio-visual project that

31. jonahberry 2016.

32. Thomas 2014.

created a virtual pop star represented by the multiracial Japanese American singer Rachel Rhodes. Genki Rockets was featured in a 2011 video game directed by Tetsuya Mizuguchi titled *Child of Eden*, where the protagonist of the game navigates through cyberspace to recover Rhodes' character Lumi, depicted as the human embodiment of the Internet.³³ *Child of Eden*'s narrative seems to emphasize the dichotomy between the human and the digital by casting Rhodes as the only human face to be saved in an entirely digital world. While *Child of Eden* tasks the protagonist with rescuing humanity (personified as Lumi) from the throes of a rogue Internet presence, Zoom Lens' projection of the relationship between the real and imagined suggests a less grim outlook on digital life. Yim's explanation of the motto refrains from encouraging a retreat into fantasy and fictionalized escapism, distancing Zoom Lens artists from the otaku as the victim of social distance, instead constructing a type of rebuilding and redefinition of the self imbued with social context and agency that is absent from the derisive connotations of otaku culture.

The Zoom Lens mantra "Fuck Real Life," attempts to counteract that. "It's about being your own and going against this idea of what is 'real' and what is not," said Yim. "It goes against the prefabricated notion that certain things need to fit in a box and cannot co-exist with each other, just like pop and noise music."³⁴

33. Newswire 2010.

34. McCarthy 2016.

5.7 "Love Without Domination:" Zoom Lens Against Suburban Neoliberal Racial Projects

Zoom Lens emerged in the late 2000s during and before the Obama Administration, in the wake of a tenuous racial landscape in the United States where claims of a post-racial political climate became magnified due to the election of the first Black president of the United States. Keeping in mind that the ethnoburb formed from urban sites formerly characterized as White suburbs, Yim directly juxtaposes their upbringing against the White supremacist history of the Southern California suburban social climate, along with the irony of living amongst White supremacists in a supposedly "post-racial" political environment that characterized the Obama administration years of 2008-2017: "Anaheim is a very... a lot of areas used to be run by the KKK. A lot of government people were involved in the KKK. Even recently, about two weekends ago, there was a huge [White supremacist] rally in a park in Anaheim, and I think that really speaks on a level that— you know— we're not really living in a post-racial society."³⁵

Yim is correct in identifying these White supremacist gatherings as deeply characteristic of the Anaheim Southern California suburb. Although I have tended to emphasize the role of ethnicity and Chinese and Taiwanese influence in these areas in my historical analysis of the ethnoburb, it is important to recall the vicious, racially charged contestation over the urban space of the ethnoburb. Monterey Park was governed by a multi-ethnic city council in 1983, where one White, two Mexican American, one Filipino American, and one Chinese American composed the council, prompting *Time Magazine* to raise Monterey Park as a pedestal for the success of multi-

35. Le, R 2016.

culturalist governance in the United States.³⁶ But in contrast, this cheerful racial optimism was minimized with the 1986 replacement of three council members, which returned the council to a White-dominated institution. An anti-immigrant campaign launched soon after which employed the slogan, “English, the family, God, the nation, and the neighborhood.”³⁷ Thus, Zoom Lens’ racial-political origins emerges from the pendulum of race relations that seems to swing between a narrative of multicultural acceptance and White supremacist backlash, “[...] I think growing up in that environment, sort of having these people with a hidden agenda forces you into this shell. You’re sort of always paranoid about who you are, who you’re with, what you’re trying to do. I’d say who I grew up with, where I grew up, has influenced my art in a lot of ways and what I’m trying to speak about.”³⁸

Directly after the election of conservative icon Donald Trump to the presidency in November 2016, Zoom Lens released their *Love Without Domination* benefit album, a fundraiser response for ACLU, Border Angels & Planned Parenthood that also brought together 20 artists on Zoom Lens for a project that would be Zoom Lens’ most vocal political orientation yet. Speaking on returning from a recent tour in Japan where Yim was able to reconnect with Japanese associates of Zoom Lens,

”It once again reinstates the power of being able to connect to people no matter the physical distance. But also, after everything lately, I feel like Zoom Lens’ place is to be here in America right now. There’s a lot of things that the artists here are

36. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 92.

37. Tseng, Kim, and Zhou 2009, 92.

38. Le, R 2016.

experiencing where we need to stand our ground about everything that is happening.

But that is also something that does effect other people around the world of course."³⁹

39. Fair Play 2017.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Digital Urbanisms

Complicate Ethnicity and Space

I began this thesis inspired by stories and works in which "alternative," nondominant, or simply unexpected juxtapositions of sub/culture ran a common current. I began this thesis by giving a rough history on the formation of a handful of token ethnic sites in the United States that would eventually become the formational site of the two subcultural phenomena that I would profile in greater detail: the Asian American auto import scene and the Los Angeles-based Zoom Lens label as a beacon for counterhegemonic, diasporically saturated artistic maneuvers. Although I have only profiled two of these sites in very rough detail in this thesis, I have shown that careful readings and analyses of these otherwise peculiar, exceptional, and somewhat "strange" sites are worthy and rich ways to read the zeitgeist of Asian American urbanisms, by emphasizing socio-historical context and the emergent history of Japanese transnational forces in shaping varying senses of pan-Asian American sensibility.

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