

Vocalization in an Ethical Matrix

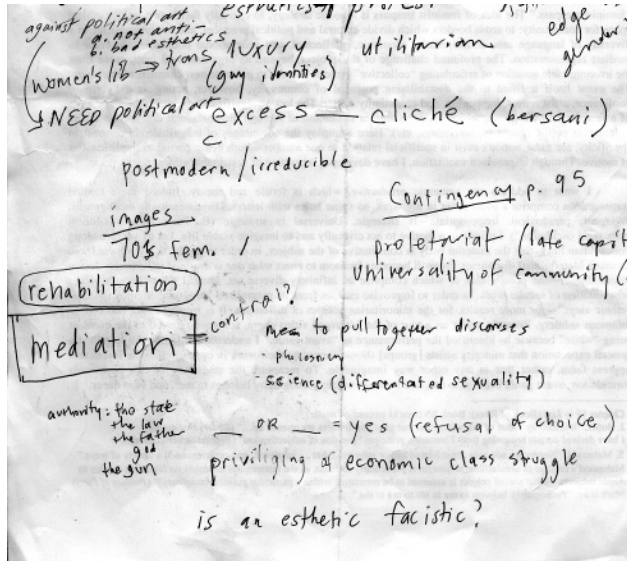
Prescript [Rehabilitating Natural Ground]

When SubRosa and I first considered our collaborative project for Intersex 1-0-1, I initially balked at the premise of “gender education,” or even at the possibility of generating solid/fixed/definitive representations of transexuality or genderqueerness.^{†*} It is a familiar mess of mediation, between the poles of visibility (for privilege and rights), and invisibility (to escape limiting grammatical and hegemonic incorporation), for better or for worse. Lately, it appears to be my method, in pairing these terms, to shift their meanings slightly, creating openings in the transitional spaces they’ve left behind. It is a perverse preoccupation with dialectics, for they are my utopian ground—to fertilize imaginative escape. Note here, that I’m indebted to the vigorous intelligence of my community, for a rich understanding of the possibility to live in queerness. Indeed, this essay is woven with analysis and evidence that result from ongoing exchange and reconstitution of cause. But I offer here, to contextualize this theatrical interruption, a new report: on community, on progress, and on strategic fame. Circling back already, I enunciate the importance to *speak outright* about transexuality as a feminist priority, despite the problematics of biological categorization and teleological claims to human rights. I am speaking from an ethnic and a queer perspective, to disrupt the flow of sophisticated[†] conversation, to sneak a rhythm that works. To talk about woman! Every essential state must be elaborated/decorated.

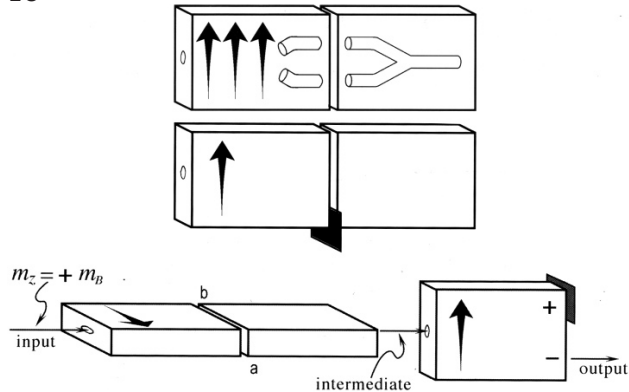
The course of this text may at times become convoluted, but I urge you to hold fast to the threads of verbiage, and

yes

yes



James Pei-Mun Tsang



The interferometer demonstrates quantal interference, illustrating a movement of *both/and*. (Daniel F. Steiner)

yes

I will at every turn track my passage towards centered meaning. My reasons for any indirect statement are not out of romantic attachment to experimental form, nor are they merely habitual rehearsal of those philosophical registers that have led us convincingly to linguistic fallout. Instead, I am enthusiastic to make *physical* certain aspects of the articulation process, which may be more gainfully employed outside of intellectual circles. In more direct terms, I deliver the primary writing exercise: to get inside these new spaces perpetually created by our enunciations, and push. Small advancements—like moving a couch a few inches across a rug (the transitional space is the indent it leaves behind¹). Or maybe these subtle shifts are also like the personal choices we make in our communities, whether to cultivate mustache hair or to re-adorn the *niqab* veil.² Islamic veils are a hot topic for feminist debate; they risk feeding into secular “liberation” initiatives. It is no idle question to ask how to talk about freedom, or even if we should bother

with that word at all. I fear lack of specificity will subsume us within the big imperialist project. Furthermore, I am interested to talk about rugs in suburban homes within the same rubric as postcolonial analysis, because they are (in my mind obviously) related by capitalist flows. I connect them now grammatically[†] (in one sentence) to fertilize chance destruction of their evil tendency.

The interpretive space of language takes particular function here, to fit theories as well as song lyrics, jumping schisms to incorporate non-Western and outer influences. It is a move to flatten analytical ambitions—for a more honest flow of language. There is no text that belongs to everyone (here I trip out on the universal and the spiritual), but still we can try to imagine a more transcendent space of communication, to keep up with semantic crossover, which occurs at the rate of currency exchange. Let me clarify that I leave deconstruction behind, as it precedes me. Rather, my reasons for collapsing categories reflect an effort to discover a more workable, singular conversation. Can you see through all this interception? Louder? I do not hate technology; unavoidably it is my natural ground. Primarily I am interested in the possible uses of rehabilitation[†] and mediation[†] as these concepts are applied to an oddity of subjects.

yes

The following treatment of trans[†] politics and resistant strategies is loaded with respectful regard for authority. I am speaking of legitimate categories, mainstream media, cultural icons, critical discourse, athletic prowess, ruling figures, norms, absolute statements. The formulation of our sense of exclusion/counter-production exists in relation to these declarative forces. We must continuously reposition our terms of agency and resistance, because they are central to any attempt at claiming human

rights. That being said, I responsively assemble terms of violence, which can deny/obstruct viable life[†] at the levels of the body, citizen, and state (I list, to perform connectivities): rape, invasion, coercion, hate, violation, imperialism. Positional power flows as global capital flows—we must know it is tied up in the same string, and we cannot ever be fully outside of it. Such grounding continues to inspire different/disadvantaged communities to collaborate upon overlapping struggles. The semantic relationships of these terms run deeper than their metaphoric echo (activity/passivity, penetration/reception), but have ontological basis. This is to say that I utterly reject coercive sexual reassignment surgery for intersexed bodies, as much as I champion the radical potential of transsexual elective transition. It is a feminist position, to disrupt normative “correcting,”³ which can have such traumatic (to the realm of physical violence) effects on the subject.

yes

Definitive process. Reflecting back, I view my listing exercises as naming processes, of regular ways in which power declaratively functions “towards” subjects (and are grammatically contingent). These lists of words may also commonly be regarded as forces of oppression.

The first list, (I title *With Respectful Regard for Authority*, or just *Authority*), we are likely to interpret for progressive potential.

The second list (bears the anticorollary title, simply *Violence*) we are likely to expel[†].

Note here, that I do not need to necessarily enlist any direct responses to oppression. For now, let us leave these lists blank, for more imaginative chance. This could be a way to think about authority beyond simple dialectical formulations. Time to think about new dangers.

AUTHORITY AUTHORITY
 with respectful regards for

ANTI-AUTHORITY
 .LEGITIMATE CATEGORIES
 -MAINSTREAM MEDIA
 CULTURAL ICONS
 CRITICAL DISCOURSE
 *ATHLETIC PROMISS
 RULING FIGURES
 NORMS
 AP SOLUTE STATEMENTS!

Violence ^{to be} ~~recolonize~~
 .RAPE
 .VIOLATION*
 INVASION
 COERCION
 →IMPERIALISM

I want to talk about the relationship of FTM (female-to-male-transsexual) and women, which is another hot topic. I am worried that the trans community is becoming cast as boy-centered. I am confronted in my community by the authoritative presence of whiteness, privilege, and unproductive victimization, which characteristically takes up the majority of space in common conversation and representation, acting as a kind of phantom entitlement on the part of certain constituents. Currently in the United States, the evolving so-called “trans sub-culture” is so affected by consumptive race and class determinants, that one can even draw a “tranny” stereotype as a 12 year-old white-boy (the idiom, the dress, the adolescent pitch of the voice). I want to address the FTM phenomenon, for it cannot escape my attention, if it has already garnered that of mainstream television. It has been said that double mastectomies in this country are mounting daily, to epidemic proportions. Indeed many feminists and ethical critics have balked with uneasiness at the trans phenomenon, as they locate their understanding of it in a very expensive, radical surgery. On the other side of mislocation, in the territory of hypercritical discourse, *trans* (as in transgressive/transgendered) ideologies have been targeted as obfuscating specific

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precarious identities, which differentiate a spectrum of non-normative sexuality, such as lesbian and particularly butch (trans thereby replacing female masculinity).

I touch upon these debates, as they are peripheral to my discussion. Many experts[†] are in the process of battling in this intellectual arena, to stake their logical claim to victory—so I will not hash it out here. What interests me, if there is a territorial battle to speak of, is the phenomenon of self-erasure,[†] which belongs to the histories of so many marginalized communities. I draw some insight here about invisibility/absence from cultural theorist Leo Bersani, whose work on contemporary American queerness incorporates a broad range of intellectual and affective influences. He writes about the dilemma of queerness as being strapped to assimilation and appropriation in its presence and suffering from homophobia and definitional crisis in its absence. I interpret that he argues responsively, for productive inhabiting of contradiction, through mediated visibility: “By not accepting and radically reworking the different identity of sameness—by rejecting the whole concept of identity—we risk participating in the homophobic project that wants to annihilate us. Only an emphasis on the specifics of sameness can help us to avoid collaborating in the disciplinary tactics that would make us invisible.”⁴ Bersani hints at certain essentialized (partially-representative) formulations, by rehabilitating sameness. I will refertilize these ideas in alternate and transcendent environments soon enough but for the moment, let them rest in American queer politics.

Recent media spectacle has led me to conclude that trans visibility is a grave; but yet, do people really have the patience to support ambiguity? It occurs to me recently, even in my own thinking and friendly discourse, that “elusive” has become cast as indulgent, or that this trans-

yes



Oprah Winfrey Show—from “The 11-year old who wants a Sex-Change.” ...Kayla then told her mother that she believed she was a boy living in a girl’s body. Angelina knew that she needed help, so she found a therapist who specializes in transgender issues.

yes

identity is not a feminist priority. Times of extreme urgency require concise enunciation. Militancy to fight wars. A shorter list of wants, and I am feeling it. Want to talk about *woman*, which in some ways has come a decade or two undone. Here I am thinking about a particular disjunctive gap of feminist discourses in the US, between now and the 1960s/’70s (early in its inception as part of the civil rights movement). I’m searching for a certain register, derived from that time, of explicit declaration for female-oriented autonomy—which is being forgotten, misappropriated, and even mocked by the convoluted ethos of now. I view the general social de-emphasis of feminist initiative to be more of a reflection of fascistic encroachment, rather than a

reflection of any significant progress in women's rights (and the rights of other feminist constituencies).

Meanwhile, I am working on a formulation about transsexuals and women, which is both grammatical and applicable. It is about mobilizing upon the fact that we all occupy similar feminized positions, as recipients of bodily control. Across strata we are regulated, undressed, coerced, and corrected. I propose that while we dismantle the two-gendered system, we should simultaneously inhabit female subjectivity, as a way to perform disruptive resistance. Thinking disruptively—which belongs in part to postmodern work—might eventually be a way to get outside of Western thought-patterns, which are both [expansively] imperialist in their application to subjects, and [locally] limiting to radical potential. Take the idea that we could obliterate gendered systems through widespread “becoming-women”⁵ by all. It is a playful rhetorical argument about shifting our notions of passivity/femininity, as well as a strategic rehabilitation of essentialist construction. In some light it is also absurdist logic, but still nearly approaches the paradoxical tension of negotiating identification (to evoke Bersani’s “different identity of sameness”). Although the displacement may at first seem evasive, you must trust in the possibility of access and discover unexpected, individuated terms of reemergence. This is a declaration of new feminist work. It is a vote to get somewhere, to progress (an unfashionable ideal), to get specific about commonality, and not to hide in the realm of impossible negative.⁶

“Progress is nothing other than breaking through a field where chance holds sway by creating new conditions more favorable to our own purposes.” –Guy Debord, Theory of the Dérive

yes



Mei Lan Fang

Script [Vocalization in an Ethical Matrix]

Beijing, 1937 [a.k.a. The Mustache Report]
 The young man was a great pop star of his century.
 He grew his mustache in protest of tyranny.
 Many celebrities followed this example.

yes

New York, 1939 [Mustache Report II]
 The young man played the part of
 women's characters but
 he was not a female impersonator,
 according to the Western sense of the word.

Report [III] on strategic fame, with atonal assistance. The singer is an embodiment of the transformative politic and germane morality. The airs which spring from the minds⁷ of a public become method and movement. In this notation, I mean to score an unorthodox pairing of secular-liberal politics and queer sexuality. For a productive (mis)reading of universal ethics upon a destabilized subject. Famous performance can enact ritualized retreat from recognition, through dispossession in a field of visibility. This obscured strategy might also be a way to think about disappointing audiences (the band may refuse to deliver). It is an

embittered violence with capital, onstage and ongoing sacrifice. But this violence is a substantive, epic question for the self. The body and the work must be tracked through theoretics and sonorous metaplay; to enmesh its origin within the grammatical unfolding. The windowsill, the stage, and didactics are tools for an ethnic siege of affirmation, to cherish a material move across the sky.

I am interested in the ways that visibility is productively mediated by improvised identification. I might also call it “strategic communicability,” which implies a certain partial representation of the subject, or essentialized figure [hero], which feels good. In speaking so, I mean to straddle the rhetoric of agency with a painful regime (see below) of practical concerns. That is to say, what is the affective potential of entertainment to alter cultural reiterations⁸ of norms? And to what end? Is enhanced communicability generally a sacrifice of critical specificity and experimentation? This line of questioning oscillates in and out of history to ask what constitutes our conception of freewill (as one antithetical to abiding conformation). To work from here is also to dissuade the whimsy of cultural critique that political art must speak from a register I call “anti-dialect,” meaning that it necessarily stands in for agonistic ethos. Such a conclusion naturally assumes a prerepresentational subversive state, prior to articulation.⁹ But why *this* work, why undo this effort? I fly these paradoxes to denaturalize Western liberal agenda, because it does not belong to me. Rehearse: smashing a window if you are thirsty for a glass of water.

“If you wish to be a good singer, you must first be a human being.” The *pansori* opera method is a physical/psychic endeavor towards ethical being. It is a transformative mode,

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translating the real into expressive narrative. Akin to other forms of East Asian opera, the sound is rhythmic, atonal, and “indifferent”¹⁰ to western genres; the technique emphasizes cracks in the vocal range, producing guttural, mysterious qualities. Through years of training, vocal cords must be strained to the point of bleeding, forcing a transition in the adherent body. Here, musical mastery is phenomenally enacted through a painful regime of submissive practice: a specific negotiation of power towards self-realization (and contradictory to “agency-as-resistance”¹¹). Furthermore, I recall this traditional figure to ask of the *human being*—to



Chan E. Park

ask what can this feel like now? I transcend high ideals in pursuit of new public airs: let’s talk about mainstream.

Electro-punk band *Le Tigre* makes pop music about liberal/queer issues. My attention to their work does not privilege it above a rich breadth of new feminist work, however they represent to me a certain positive essentialism. Their tight dance beats hook international youth into more radical politics, reenlisting riot grrrl ethics of the ’90s. In the face of a despondent fascistic public mood, they make joyous what has become passé: *This is what democracy sounds like/peace NOW!* They also have a song that defends their rise to popularity: *You call it climbing/I call it visibility/You call it coolness/I call it finally free.* This affective lyric marks new articulation of butch lesbianism within the mainstream (soon to cross hip hop, with a *Missy Elliot* remix). I hold *LeTigre’s* super-stardom in contrast to the dialog of problematic identification, whose

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poles are rooted within the ambivalent ground of communicability. It is a sacrifice either way (particularly in terms of racial scheme—to the limits of punk rock freedom), between specificity and accessibility. This is not to disavow declarative function, but we must productively work with the fact that it continuously breaks down (I might add, by the same reiterative process which enforces assimilation—in the sense of “selling out”).

My semantic *productive* is fertile and messy. Strategic fame is an improvised partial-representation, a kind of mediated visibility. Mediation reorients the middle, an intervening agent. Sacrifice may be destruction or surrender, but it also can reveal an unexpected location of free-will. Here I summon the authoritative secular/non-western dichotomy to reflect upon how we allow ourselves to become civilized. Let us think of universal paradigms as strategically paradoxical (the movement is not so innocent). At the same time I prioritize a progressive motive to imagine viable life. To feign the stage and command a shifting limelight, which is different then selling out. I enjoy calling this exuberance “ethnic siege”—*for* more results, for pragmatic applications of difference. It is worthy to act this out, to infamous subtlety. Recently when I toured the *Marriage* video opera, someone typified the event as being “white” because s/he identified the performance as being “avant garde.” I understand this mistake to reflect a general expectation that minority artists [groups] should formulate their work in opposition to the forces that oppress them, rather than in any other way imaginable. To recapture the stagnancy of this backwards formulation, I say avant garde belongs to me, and I am not white—pornography belongs to me,¹² and I am queer.

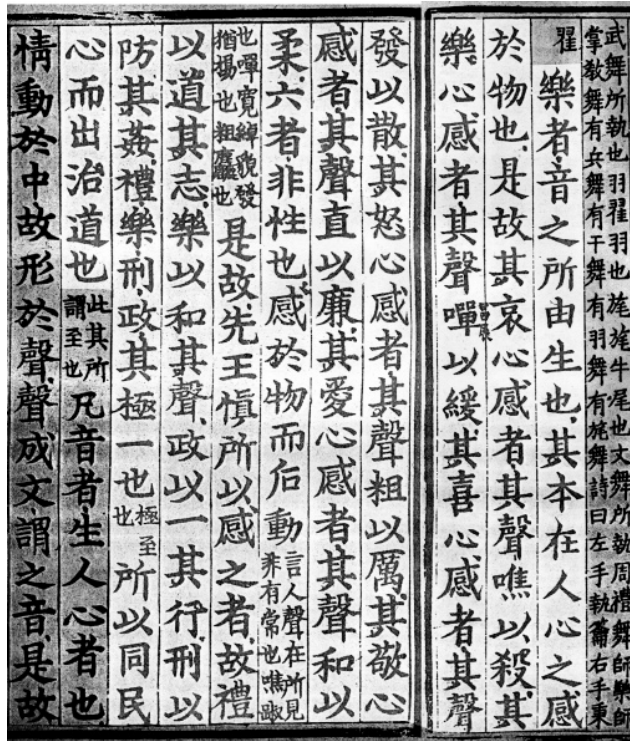
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Postscript [Ethnic Affirmation]

Positing new terms of sophistication. “*After all, [John] Cage’s widespread influence occurred sometime before the art world was ready to listen to the disruptive voices of women, some people of color, and lesbians and gays, all clamoring for recognition and legitimation... [Perhaps] Cage’s notions about democratizing art helped pave the way to the airing of those issues around race, gender and sexuality, and class that have since burst through the palace gates of high white culture.*”—Yvonne Rainer, Radical Juxtapositions

Summation implies an end-point, total/conclusion. Centering may be a more favorable focal activity, adjusting axes (which might once have been tangential) to coincide as points of clarification. The colonized mind may desire to break free from being the dupe of imitation, but how? The definitive process constitutes a central rehabilitative practice, to potentially advance terms of agency beyond a political imaginary. Does to “break free” translate into full autonomy? Desire is never nearly so selfish as to deny its inherent contingencies upon force, aggressive or otherwise. But still we may experience a need to restore to a condition of constructive activity certain unifying practices. My consolidating efforts represent an interest to reorient diffracted subjects within an improvised dialectic, in order to generate a productive new middle ground. This in-between position (the center) also acquires focal meaning, in the sense of clarification. Thereby the battle between elusive and definitive might somehow be won through active mediation—because in the end, we hope to comprehend. Here, I collapse boundaries between linguistic debates and queer politics, hoping to synthesize strategies that help us to bring

yes



From Chapter 19, *Book of Rites, Yo Ki* [Record of Music].

it all together, without reducing every particular. The shape grows rounded and dense.

It is the (once deadly) same process, if you believe in the authority of metaphor—which is not some elitist privileging of poetry. For instance, make “colonize” accessible to disbanded scenarios: it pulls out from your mind, to neighborhood and nation. I’m thinking of the way skin color walks into a room, or artists destroy ghettos, or gays assimilate. The terrifying colony factor permeates every

inner and outer ethnic dilemma. This word “ethnic” becomes leveraged, in part as an old reclamation trick, to take back what multiculturalism has glossed over as being insensitive. Take for example the much-debated Affirmative Action movement in the United States, which like gay assimilation, has worked along the belief that minority groups are “just as good” or “the same” as white people. What do I mean when I say “not white”? It is an acknowledgement of the big Other, or “them” that whiteness perpetuates—in which there are limited possibilities in taking ownership. We see this tired dialectic played out ad infinitum in the gauntlet of identity politics. It’s almost as if what you are doesn’t matter, but you must justify a position. Furthermore, evading definition does not especially inspire long-term promise. I’m shifting the focus away from visibility towards a separating center, towards a new wholeness, despite its semantic/historic collusion with the white body. My basic allowance for these paradoxical dealings is simple, naturalized, perhaps even irreverent. In common relations, totality belongs to the realm of the spiritual or architectural; ethics to the personal, and reasoning to the law. But also, these rules belong to history and—in the words of Homi Bhabha—colonialism takes power in the very name of history.¹³

On the other side of history, in the ever-occurring now, I see intersexed and transexed bodies traveling radially through psychic continuity, piercing the triadic structure of subject formation. Like an amputee or untrained dancer, I have discovered new intelligence in these limbs. It is through limping recovery and post-operative logic that I have arrived at an enthusiastic, rehabilitative stance. Note here about the elaborating distance from poststructuralism in my thoughts, like the filigree on the wall. It occurred to me recently as I was rereading Donna Haraway’s *Promises*

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yes

of *Monsters*, which is a formative influence on my treatment of nature, that when she wrote that essay, I was a 14 year old, jumping on my bed screaming “suck my left one,” along to *Bikini Kill* (who ten years later is now the reincarnate *LeTigre*). I realize my relationship to technology has shifted so far from cyberpolitics. This could be a return to the left one.



*†Terms referenced to the *Yes Species Glossary*, for further elaboration.

yes

1. I attribute this insight in part to Wynne Greenwood, who showed me something about this movement in a video. Also, in the course of writing, I had to keep moving my couch to make room for the expanding pile of research materials. A small portion of this text originally belongs to a longer correspondence with Wynne, about her project *Tracy and the Plastics* (Greenwood, Wynne, *Culture For Pigeon*. Troubleman Records, 2004).
2. Reemerging veils are a recent trend in the current Islamic Piety movement—an action supposed by Western feminism to be irreconcilable with “advancement.” Progressivism may only conceive of taking the veil off as liberation, yet there is space for interpretation within the simple gesture. For instance Saba Mahmood argues that the veil also inhabits a refusal of tagharrub (westernization), in her critique of how secular feminist subjectivity is applied to Islamic women (Mahmood, Saba, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, pg. 44).
3. “Although intersex and transex sometimes seem at odds with one another, the first opposing unwanted surgery, the second sometimes calling for elective surgery, it is most important to see that both challenge the principle that natural dimorphism should be maintained at all costs. (Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pg. 6).
4. Bersani, Leo, *Homos*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, pg. 76.
5. My treatment of the concept of “Becoming-woman” references the Deleuze and Guattari model. Particularly, see Guattari, Felix, *Soft Subversions*, Sylvere Lotringer, ed. New York: Semiotext[e], 1996.

6. “Of history I do not want to exist in the impossible negative.” (Bass, Math, “Attention Gap.” *Pilot TV Guide*. Chicago, 2005.) Math Bass is my collaborating partner in a project called *Marriage*. *Marriage* is an ongoing conversation between two, who seek to ritualistically terrorize, retreat to and resurface from a planet where they are rendered apparitions—in siege of ethnic affirmation.
7. “All modulations of the voice spring from the minds of men. When the feelings are moved within, they are manifested in the sounds of the voice; and when those sounds are combined so as to form compositions, we have what are called airs... The airs of a state going to ruin are expressive of sorrow and (troubled) thought. There is an interaction between the words and airs (of the people) and the character of their government” (*Book of Rites [Ligi]*, Part IV: Book XVII [Chapter 19], *Yo Ki [Record of Music]*, Section I [For English, see also *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 5]).
8. J. Butler: “it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up...” (Butler, Judith, *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits “sex.”* New York: Routledge, 1993).
9. I am particularly fascinated to discuss Foucault’s relational power models within the linguistic process, particularly his principal “paradox of subjectivation” (Foucault, Michel, *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982).
10. Park, Chan E. *Voices From the Straw Mat*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003.
11. Mahmood’s concept of “agency-as-resistance” blows open the assumed dialectics of subordination/subversion: “I want to move away from an agonistic and dualistic framework—one in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated.” (Mahmood, pgs. 32, 23)
12. M. Bass: “Pornography belongs to me to me to me to me.”
13. Homi Bhabha: “If colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through figures of farce... In this comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects, mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhabha, Homi. “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” *October*, Vol. 28, *Discipleship: A special Issue on Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).

yes