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Between Koenji and Brooklyn: Tokyo, New York and the Circulations of Experimental Musics in a Global World

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Abstract:

Using a group of Japanese born experimental musicians who make their lives in Tokyo and New York as a case study, this article examines how new musical genres and forms are created, shared and mediated through layers of circulations, identities and locations. I argue that these musicians' lives and music have a kind of "noisy" quality, complicating genre boundaries and identity binaries in their wake. Through ethnographic "thick descriptions", to use Clifford Geertz's framework, and the words of the musicians themselves, I show the web of musical genres, languages, geopolitical identities, and gender relations that combine to make up the texture of musical performances.

In addition, this article is also a case study in thinking through and with a sea change in the study of Japanese music. In recent years, building on the work of scholars of Japanese cultural studies, ethnomusicologists and researchers of Japanese music have critiqued how monocultural and monoethnic mythologies, often characterized as *Nihonjinron,* have influenced the study and production of Japanese music. The literature on Japanese music has increasingly focused on popular and experimental musics, as opposed to canonical "traditional" Japanese music, such as *gagaku*, long considered "authentically Japanese." This shift has allowed for the study of how Japanese contemporary identity is created and maintained through music.

Ethnomusicology and Area Studies are Cold War enterprises, designed to create research that would help maintain that world order, educate Americans as global leaders of a bipolar world and change hearts and minds in foreign lands. This context is critical in understanding why initial postwar scholarship on Japanese music focused on this canonical "traditional" Japanese music—it fed into a kind of conservative nationalism that was integral to US-Japan relations. In addition, from the use of Japanese motifs in Impressionist paintings to the way many Western ethnographers have tried to isolate a pure and authentic Japanese sound, Japan has long been the subject of exoticization. Thus, this article both gives readers a synoptic view of US based Japanese music scholarship moving away from such Cold War paradigms and also contributes to this shift in studies of Japanese music and culture.

Keywords: Japanese music, Japanese identity, Ethnography, Experimental music, Improvisation, *Nihonjinron,* Japanese cultural studies, jazz, gender

In recent years, building on the work of scholars of Japanese cultural studies, ethnomusicologists and researchers of Japanese music have critiqued how monocultural and monoethnic mythologies, often characterized as *Nihonjinron,* have influenced the study and production of Japanese music. The literature on Japanese music has increasingly focused on popular and experimental musics, as opposed to canonical "traditional" Japanese music, such as *gagaku*, long considered "authentically Japanese." This shift has allowed for the study of how Japanese contemporary identity is created and maintained through music. These scholars ask: if the study of Japanese music can move beyond *Nihonjinron* and its assumptions of purity of Japanese culture, what kinds of previously hidden sound histories and lives come forth?

In this article, I focus on a group of Japanese born experimental musicians who make their lives in Tokyo and New York. I refer to a constellation of genres including experimental, free jazz, noise and avant-garde musics.[1] The specific histories and intricacies of these interconnected genres are beyond the scope of this paper; however, what interests me is that music made within this constellation is not easily resolvable into one genre, culture, or historical context. The music and lives of these musicians show that experimental music practice can both be a site of identity formation and a place of cultural instability. Although experimental music has been inflected by, and has perhaps benefitted from, the post-war order, I argue that these musicians' lives and music have a kind of "noisy" quality, complicating genre boundaries and identity binaries in their wake. Through ethnographic "thick descriptions", to use Clifford Geertz's framework, and the words of the musicians themselves, I show the web of musical genres, languages, geopolitical identities, and gender relations that combine to make up the texture of musical performances (Geertz 1973). I unearth lives and histories that would have been rendered invisible by a canonized monocultural Japan.

In addition to unearthing particular lives and histories, this article is also a case study in thinking through and with what I perceive to be a sea change in the study of Japanese music. Ethnomusicology is a Cold War enterprise and came to prominence through postwar federal funding as part of a policy designed to reshape academia. Area studies and ethnomusicology experts were trained to do research that would help maintain that world order, educate Americans as global leaders of a bipolar world and change hearts and minds in foreign lands. This context is critical in understanding why initial postwar scholarship on Japanese music focused on this canonical "traditional" Japanese music—it fed into a kind of conservative nationalism that was integral to US-Japan relations. In addition, from the use of Japanese motifs

in Impressionist paintings to the way many Western ethnographers have tried to isolate a pure and authentic Japanese sound, Japan has long been the subject of exoticization (Corbett 2000, 183). Thus, this article both gives readers a synoptic view of US based Japanese music scholarship moving away from such Cold War paradigms and is also contributing to this new direction in Japanese cultural studies.

The Myth of Monoethnic Japanese Music

Japanese music is no more monolithic than Japanese ethnicity and identity. The post-war concept of Japan—monoethnic, monocultural, a dedicated American ally—is fraught with inaccuracies and contradictions. Those who choose to ignore the nation's multiethnic history are choosing to ignore Japan's history as an imperialist power. As John Lie has argued: "The fundamental forces of modern Japanese history—state-making, colonial expansion, and capitalist industrialization—engendered ethnic heterogeneity. To speak of modern Japan is to speak of multiethnic Japan" (2001, 83). Takeshi Komagome, Eiji Oguma, and others have shown how both during and after the colonial period, Japanese identity has been formed in dialogue with those on the mainland of Japan, on the peripheries islands, and the rest of Asia (Komagome 1996; Oguma 1998). As Harumi Befu has argued, through the monoethnic *Nihonjinron* myth in the post-war period, Japan situates itself vis a vis the West—especially the United States—for economic and political needs (2001, 6). The Japanese nation state, therefore, necessarily erases its own colonial past, and its direct links to Asia (Michael Bourdaghs 2012, 73). All the while, Japanese companies utilize that past and export their goods to ex-colonial countries, so that for example *anime* is watched throughout Asia (Iwabuchi 2002, 4).

The idea of an “authentic” Japanese music, therefore, is an ahistorical, simplistic way of promoting Japaneseness in the face of colonial history. Yet, “national purity cannot be found in music; sound does not respect national borders ”(Lie 2001, 67). In the modern period, Japanese politicians and scholars have shaped the category of traditional Japanese music in discourse with the Other and especially in dialogue with Western music. What is considered by both scholars and Japanese citizens to be traditional music was profoundly altered in the Meiji Period (Wade 2014, 19). Western music was, in turn, used to support Japan and its’ colonies entry into the modern world order (Hosokawa 1998; Everett and Lau 2004, xvi). Meanwhile, in the postwar, Japanese popular music, especially *enka*, continues to be popular in Korea and Taiwan, showing the colonial period’s continuing reverberations (Pilzer 2012).

Though Japanese music is often thought of and taught as the performance of unchanged, classical music performed on traditional instruments, even these practices were born of circulation and feedback of musical ideas. Starting with court singers from Silla being sent to mourn Emperor Ingyo’s death in the fifth century to Prince Shotoku’s (d. 622) well documented love of Tang Dynasty court music, the premodern era is rife with examples of importation, borrowing and exchange of East Asian musics in Japan (Shiba 2009). However, music frequently described as “traditionally” Japanese is often symbolic in contemporary Japan, and scholarship about Japan, of a timeless and yet ancient Japan—a site to perform “Japaneseness.” Just as John Pemberton describes how in the post-colonial period, Javanese gamelan music became a symbolic presence, regulated ritualized background music for wedding ceremonies, so too traditional music has come to be a shorthand for classical Japan (1987).[2] A Tokyo citizen may only hear *gagaku* court music in a green tea commercial, or at a summer festival signifying a convenient historical narrative that recreates an imagined past, unified in its historicity.

This "traditional" music is frequently considered by both Japanese people, and many scholars, in isolation from the music that the vast majority listen to everyday, as well as the experimental musics I focus on here. The vast majority of Japanese cannot read any form of Japanese music notation, and it was not until recently that Japanese music has begun to be taught in grade schools (Wade 2014, 23).[3] Most popular musical genres are mostly or entirely non-Japanese in origin—J-pop, Japanese reggae and hip-hop to name just a few (Condry 2006; Sterling 2010). Jazz has had a constant presence in Japan from the 1920's (Atkins 2001). Even *enka*, the genre often called *nihon no uta* 日本の歌 (songs of Japan), was created in the postwar period designed to stand in opposition to the huge influx of American popular music, and is reliant on Western musical forms and techniques (Amazawa 1997; Yano 2002; Michael Bourdaghs 2012, 65).

Yet Japanese music, or perhaps more provocatively, music from Japan, or music made by those Japanese born, continues to be an important site of cultural, social and identity creation. In this article, I seek to complicate the term "Japanese music," and to examine the intricate web of twenty-first century Japanese musical creation on instruments and in modes oft-considered traditional, and not. By focusing on "experimental" music I will show the ways in which Japanese musical creation in the twenty-first century is both rooted in the regional, *and* born out of the edges of global circulations creating a vibrant cycle of feedback. Furthermore, experimental music in Japan, must work hard against the "mainstream din" of popular repetitive music (Yano 2016). The presence of postwar experimental music shows us the vibrancy of feedback. Certainly, experimental music has at times been supported by institutions sustaining this Cold War-inflected relationship between Japan and the US through grants and teaching positions. However, I argue that the artists' music and lives presented below simultaneously also

subvert this very same relationship. Through the feedback the cracks in the postwar nationalist narrative become clear, forcing a reconsideration of outdated categories like “Japanese” and “American” or “traditional” and “modern.”

An Unambiguous Ambiguity

My approach to these issues is ethnographic as well as personal; it is based on fieldwork in New York, Tokyo, and Europe, as a student of the *koto* player Michiyo Yagi, profiled below, as a radio DJ, and a concert-goer. I am a *koto* musician who grew up in Japan from age two, and I constantly straddle the supposedly strong borders between East and West; traditional and experimental; musician and academic; observer and participant; visitor and community member; English speaker and Japanese speaker. The more I try to unravel the role I occupy, the spaces I inhabit, the music I listen to, play and research, the more entangled I seem to be.

Through an examination of the work and lives of three musicians—Michiyo Yagi, Ikue Mori and Koichi Makigami—I show how the circulations and “transformative cycles of feedback” between individuals continue to be key features of experimental music making (Novak 2013, 17). Michiyo Yagi has made her career playing an instrument considered canonically Japanese, and traditional. She plays in both traditional and international contexts, while remaining deeply embedded in Japanese cultural production, calling into question the binary between traditional and modern. Ikue Mori has made her musical career entirely in New York, and only later, once established, did she make connections with musicians in Japan. Koichi Makigami’s career meanwhile straddles these two places—he has always worked in between Japan and the rest of the world. All three musicians’ work can be defined through circulations and feedback; these artists’ lives and music are based on a web of cultural understandings,

geographic locations, and collaborations. Their careers have also interconnected with New York to varying degrees, making that city itself a useful interlocutor in this story of experimental Japanese music.

Recent studies of Japanese music have highlighted the irony of studying of Japanese music ethnographically. Marilyn Ivy describes how "cultural self-obsessions", cultural self-reference in Japan "can be read as a longing for a pre-modernity, a time before the West, before the catastrophic imprint of westernization" (Ivy 1995, 241). Any sense of an "immutable core of culture" across time is based on a kind of national modern imaginary (Ivy 1995, 1). On the other hand, as David Novak, Marie Abe, Kevin Fellezs and others have argued, Japanese musicians operate in a kind of strategically essentialist non-essentialism (Novak 2013; Fellezs 2012; Abe 2018). Fellezs writes about the Black Japanese American *enka* star Jero: "Jero's performances of enka show us that negotiating the 'painful embrace of the skin and all its contradictions' can expand current notions of identity and identity formation that better reflect the multiple lineages we all share (Fellezs 2012, 352). Bearing forth from the lives of these musicians who traverse the treacherous waters of Japan and Japanese cultural and social identity is, therefore, an unambiguous ambiguity, a contradiction in terms. The sounds and lives of these musicians lead us towards new ways of constructing Japanese identity—and identity of all forms.

For much of the twentieth century, ethnomusicologists typically argued that media-driven globalization of culture would lead to a "greying out" of folk and regional cultures, a process that would ultimately result in destruction of non-Western cultures and traditions (Lomax 1968, 4–5). While the creation of the new "world music" market in the '80s and '90s allowed previously commercially peripheral genres to reach international audiences, musicians from the non-Western world were often under pressure to conform to a more uniform production quality and

to sometimes adjust their musical styles (Meintjes 2003, 27). Once sanitized the ways in which these musics are viewed has often been highly racialized and exoticized. With regards East Asian music, there is a long history of Western composers appropriating East Asian musical and philosophical concepts into their music while simultaneously dismissing the viewpoints and artistic output of Asian and Asian American artists, both in the US and in Europe (Hisama 1993; 2004; Wong 2004; Corbett 2000). US composers and musicians have relied on Japanese musical tropes for "exotic authenticity" for one hundred and fifty years (Sheppard 2019).

While there is no doubt that globalization and international mass popular culture have influenced regional musics and their resulting circulations, I believe that the musicians I describe show a new way of creating regional music in a global context. Inherent in their music, and the communities that take part in their music, is an act of opposition to monoethnic music making. In his analysis of noise music, a transnational form of music influenced by punk and rock, that came out of Osaka in the '80s, Novak argues that it is the circulation of music, and resulting feedback at the edges of this circulation that allows for new forms of music to be created (2013). These artists I discuss here operate at the at the margins of circulation, feedback, and distortion. I frequently pluralize "circulation" within this paper because I believe this highlights the presence of multiple forms of musical circulation operating today; through live performances, migration, and recordings. The sounds and the communities created are in opposition to the corporatized soundscape of Tokyo, and the post-war monoethnic cultural myth those soundscapes are born of. They are a "critical response" to the post-war Japanese order (Plourde 2019, 32).

New York and the Promise of a Freer Tomorrow[4]

New York has represented an artistic utopia for multiple generations of Japanese artists and musicians in the twentieth century (Sooudi 2014). Though Europe was the focus of artistic influence on Japan in the interwar years, by the 1950s, New York was considered the center of avant-garde art, and Japanese artists began to turn to New York for inspiration (Weisenfeld 2002).[5] Starting in 1964, Japanese were allowed to more easily obtain tourist visas to the United States, and artists and musicians trickled into New York (Yoshimoto 2005, 30). However, currency controls and poverty in Japan meant that travel to New York in the ‘50s and ‘60s remained almost entirely the prerogative of the very wealthy, or those who had gotten scholarships to study at prestigious institutions.[6] Musicians and artists like Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama, Toshi Ichiyanagi and Toko Shinoda thrived in the mixed-media and intermedia collectives and in the new classical music scene (Kaneda 2015, 89).[7] By the early 1960s, avant-garde Japanese saw New York as a welcoming place. As the video artist Shigeko Kubota has said, if John Cage was accepted in New York, then she could be too (Yoshimoto 2005, 17).

By the late 1960s, a generation of jazz fans and musicians, including saxophone legend Sadao Watanabe, had come of age listening to Armed Forces Radio (FEN), visiting jazz *kissa* (listening cafes), trading jazz scores with fellow artists, and performing for US troops (Watanabe Sadao 2019). Hozumi Nakadaira, photographer and owner of the *kissa* Dug says: “some nights we would have multiple big-name jazz musicians from the US performing on one night and we’d go from one concert to the other” (Nakadaira 2019). Thanks also to increased economic growth in Japan, loosening of currency controls, and the revaluation of the yen to the dollar, Japanese music journalism reached new heights of influence and seriousness which fed, and fed off of, the

human interchange with New York. Tokyo-based journalists like *Swing Journal* editor Kiyoshi Koyama wrote about the new loft jazz music coming from lofts in downtown Manhattan that no other publication anywhere in the world covered (2008; 2014; 2017). "I became friends with Ornette Coleman and other artists once I started going to New York. I also saw the same musicians when they came to Tokyo, and my publication wrote about these new forms of jazz for Japanese audiences" (Koyama 2016). Artists in Japan read about these musicians and came to New York to play with them (Koyama 2015). They also listened to Shoichi Yui and other radio hosts play jazz music and interview visiting jazz musicians.[8] These musicians followed the newest, increasingly experimental and improvised, "free" jazz music coming out of New York, and artists such as Masahiko Satoh, Kaoru Abe and Yosuke Yamashita began to create a nascent free jazz scene in Tokyo, centered around Shinjuku and the neighborhoods along the Chuo Line (Soejima 2002).

Many non-classical, non-elite Japanese musicians including saxophone player Kazutoki Umezu moved to New York to follow this new music. "I saw [free jazz saxophone player] Ornette Coleman's address in a jazz magazine, and I decided to move to New York. I was shocked that my free jazz idol, who I had listened to on records was willing to play with me" (Umezu 2014).[9] Musicians like Akira Sakata and percussionist Toru Tsuchitori did not study at conservatories or hope to perform at prestigious venues, and in fact the music they played was influenced by Black Power movements and often was in opposition to such institutions (Tsuchitori 2015; Sakata 2015).

From the late 1970s, musicians travelled frequently to New York to perform. A new wave of Japanese musicians wanting to take part in punk, rock, "no wave," and the various New York downtown experimental arts scenes began arriving. Musicians like Ryuichi Sakamoto—

who has been commercially successful both in the United States and Japan—and underground musicians like saxophonist Tamio Shiraishi began to spend time in both New York and Tokyo and remained immersed in the experimental music scene in both cities.

At this time, the postwar model of Japanese artists going to New York and being influenced by Western artists began to change. Western musicians in and beyond New York, including most famously John Cage, had long pursued explorations of traditional Japanese aesthetics, tinged with orientalism. "Downtown" experimental musicians in the 1980s, however, began to take an active interest in *contemporary* Japanese music and art. Inspired by Japanese pop culture as well as music, some of these artists learned to speak and read Japanese. Many of these musicians collaborated with Japanese musicians in New York as well as in Tokyo. Shakuhachi player and reed musician Ned Rothenberg studied Japanese and spent time in Japan as did saxophonist John Zorn (Rothenberg 2018). In addition, Tokyo was a safe haven and a lucrative market for established jazz artists in an era of big spending by Japanese corporations on musical and artistic productions. International record sales, concerts, festivals and record labels created strong fan bases throughout the world. This resulted in even less famous artists being part of international music scenes. The music—making process in which Japanese musicians could participate became more collaborative, trans-national, and multi-dimensional.[10]

New genres of music from Japan, including noise, began to make their mark on the international music scene. Bands like Boredoms became popular in Japan only after their success in the West. Noise music never became anywhere near as popular in Japan as it was in North America, and *onkyo*, a musical genre influenced by Tokyo's soundscape, gained legendary if this "underground" status throughout the Western world (Plourde 2019). Japanese artists began to cultivate multi-continental audiences. Labels based in North America, such as John Zorn's

Tzadik, put out records by Japanese artists working in experimental genres. Now, New York remains a key point of contact for Japanese musicians, yet many have begun to look to Asia.

However, Japanese artists and musicians who make their lives there must contend with orientalist or essentialist tropes about Japan. It is imperative, therefore, to focus on the musicians as "noisy agent[s]," and allow tthem to speak for themselves, and focus on the granularity of their lives and performances (Wong 2004, 5; Ortner 1995, 174). Performances are constructive, sites of constant reiteration and negotiating with norms that materialize discourse (Wong 2004, 4; Butler 2011, 2). So too from performance emerges the possibility of shattering those constantly reiterated norms. Musical performance and the resulting feedback loops and circulations constitutes a reiterative practice that both constructs and threatens Japanese identity. At the same time, the identities of the musicians I feature are very much rooted in the particular. This juxtaposition between the local regional base of music making, and global circulation is precisely where the feedback takes place. It is not merely that they take part in a sort of amorphous global avant-garde, made sanitized and Westernized by globalization. By peering into the lives of these musicians, the recordings they make, the gigs they do, we begin to see just how little linearity there is, just how much the act of making music is one of distortion, feedback and granular jaggedness.

Twilight in Amsterdam: Ethnography and Non-essentialism

It is twilight in Amsterdam. Soon the room would be filled with people who will come to hear free jazz—or should I call it experimental music? I am not an audience member tonight, however; I am with the band, assisting my teacher, Michiyo Yagi (figure 1). The band is made

up of three Japanese musicians: my teacher; Koichi Makigami, voice; Tamaya Honda, drums; as well as Ingebrigt Håker Flaten, bass, from Norway.

The Dutch sound engineer and I talk in English, with me translating for my teacher, conversing about how best to amplify the two *kotos* as well as her voice. Both *kotos* have already been electrified by a guitar maker back in Tokyo but the Dutch sound engineer wants to amplify the acoustic sound as well as use a digital interface to connect the *kotos* to the sound system. We insist that she does not need microphones for the acoustic sound; as the *koto* itself is old, it no longer makes enough reverberations to let out a beautiful enough sound to be worth picking up. "Fine, fine. I just thought it would be something nice for a change. Whatever you say." The engineer, unsatisfied but having given up, goes to his booth. The sound check begins.

It is now completely dark outside. The room is about half full. I hear a smattering of Japanese—this is the first city with a sizable Japanese population that the group has toured in. They will have almost all left before the concert ends, probably because the music is too different from what they expected when the saw *koto* in advertising for the show. In the front are the older audience members, all Dutch—they look as if they have been attending concerts since the dawn of free jazz in the '60s. They are mostly couples, wearing comfortable shoes, windbreakers and colorful glasses. They will buy out our stock of CDs for sale, eager for something hard to purchase outside of Japan, and wanting a physical copy for their collection. There are a few younger listeners in the back—with dyed hair and boots, they look at home in this venue as much as they would in a Tokyo basement club or Berlin dancefloor. The house lights begin to dim as Koichi Makigami walks on the stage.

"Now it's Just Music": Japanese Instruments and Possibilities for Experimental Music[11]

The venue is a finished basement with a mural in the back and a tiny bar selling lukewarm beer and sodas below the train tracks in bohemian Nishi Ogikubo. Aketa no mise has been a mainstay of the experimental scene since the 1970s. The audience is tiny, seated in a mere two rows facing the performers at the front. Half of the room feels taken up by two *kotos* dwarfing the stage. We are mid performance and Todd Nicholson (bass) and Tamaya Honda (drums) are playing full steam. Michiyo Yagi stands behind the twenty-one string *koto*, propped up on a keyboard stand. The bass *koto* is looped, creating a beat upon which she is about to play. She grabs a drumstick, smacks the strings with it, dampening them, and begins to strum the strings with her other hand, with plectra. The emanating sound, noisy, is rough and urgent, and takes over the entire basement. The audience sits, inundated by a wall of textured noise.

Michiyo Yagi's trajectory highlights how music from Japan is constructed through regional identity and global circulations of sounds (Yagi 2015; 2016; 2018). Yagi considers herself to be both a traditional *koto* player and an international improvising and composing musician (figure 2). Her musical identity is rooted in the Japan-centric *koto* world as well as in the global, diffuse and vast network of improvisers who take part in jazz, new music, and other scenes. Her music reflects the dual nature of her identity; she is just as comfortable playing traditional pieces as she is performing her own compositions based on Western pop or rock music or doing free improvisation.

Born to a *koto* teacher mother, Yagi began learning *koto* at the age of three, but switched to the piano soon after. "One day in high school I happened to hear a bass koto performance on the radio. This made me want to study *koto* seriously." She became a student of the Sawai School of koto, a newer sub school within the Ikuta School. "When I lived in my teacher's

house, I had to clean and cook, as well as prepare for my teacher's performances. I didn't have time to practice and would get in trouble from my teacher." This, combined with a number of formative experiences in her twenties, led her to desire to go beyond the confines of Japanese traditional music.

In 1989 Yagi was a visiting scholar at Wesleyan University. "The students there had weekly concerts where they were expected and encouraged to perform their own compositions, even when they were still learning their instruments." After a particularly inspiring John Cage piece at Bang on the Can Festival, Yagi decided to go searching further afield for musical collaborators. She began to meet New York-based improvisers and began playing non-traditional musical styles associated with the New York downtown music scene in the '80s and '90s like John Zorn, Elliott Sharp and Ned Rothenberg. These musicians have been her collaborators ever since.

Returning to Japan, Yagi quit the Sawai School and begin using the *koto* in international experimental musical contexts.[12] As an independent performer, Yagi takes full advantage of twenty-first century cross-cultural experimental musical collaborations and has exploited the many possibilities of the flexible *koto*. "I got an electric guitar maker to electrify my *koto* with piezo mics so that I could play with a drum set and not get drowned out." She hits the *koto* with drumsticks so that it becomes a percussive instrument. By using a bow on her *koto*, she incorporates Western string instrument sounds into her music. Using pedals, she loops, distorts and pushes the sounds of her *koto*. "If I hear something, I want to see if I can make that sound on the *koto*."

Yagi wants to be taken seriously as a member of experimental musical communities, and not as a "traditional Japanese musician" who happens to play a bit of improv. "I don't want

people to choose to play with me because I'm a *koto* player," she says. "I want them to play with me because I'm a musician they want to play with. And I want to be able to play, to improvise, with any musician. To get beyond that first step, to go from being a musician who plays *koto* to a good musician, and to be respected as a good musician took a long time. I had to learn every part of the instrument and had to be able to retune while I was performing. I listened to a lot of music so that I could learn to go beyond that, to put my own opinion forth (Whatley 2019)."

This in turn influenced Yagi's conception of her canonical repertoire performances. "Even during traditional music, you must pay attention to the tuning as it goes out of tune, the influence of the room on the sound, so I'm always listening, in a way improvising. I come to all these ways of playing are the same in the body and mind. When I was young, I approached these traditional pieces as a foreigner: 'oh this is the kind of way I should play traditional music. Now I don't think that way, and I just play the music. I never thought it would become like this." Here, Yagi encapsulates one of the most striking dichotomies of performing "traditional Japanese music" in twenty first century Japan. Because of more than a century of Western music education, most Japanese grow up with little access to so-called traditional music. Therefore, any musician that plays koto—or other Japanese instruments—in the twenty first century must, to some extent, access it from a place of foreignness. This further muddies any distinctions possible between players of these instruments who grew up in Japan, and players who grew up in other countries, or those who are considered ethnically Japanese, and those who are not.

Michiyo Yagi is part of an emerging group of musicians who play Japanese traditional instruments and yet take part in a variety of musical scenes and genres across multiple continents. These musicians include: *sho* players Ko Ishikawa and Mayumi Miyata, *koto* player Miya Masaoka, *shamisen* player Yumiko Tanaka, and a number of *shakuhachi* players including

Ralph Samuelson, Elizabeth Brown and Ned Rothenberg. Taken as a whole, they perform everything from canonical pieces to jazz to experimental or no-genre improvisation. Though they are by no means typical performers of their instruments, these musicians are notable for fully belonging to their respective musical traditions while also taking part in musical scenes and genres outside of their tradition.

Yagi's career is both regional—focused on the *koto*, a traditional Japanese instrument, and training students within Japan— and international—she performs with musicians worldwide, and aims to increase appreciation of *koto* worldwide. She situates herself in three distinct yet intimately linked musical worlds—the world of *koto* and traditional Japanese music, the community of Tokyo-based underground and experimental musicians, and the international community of experimental, jazz, new music and improvisation.

Koichi Makigami: Space and Vocal Sounds Around the World

In discussing the roving resonant quality of *chindonya*, a Japanese marching band-like musical and performance genre, Marie Abe writes: "while a passive notion of space can evoke a homogeneous identity attached to a place within geographical delineations (e.g., Japan as a monoethnic nation), the dynamism and relationality of resonance denaturalizes the isomorphism between a place and the presumed homogeneity of subjectivity therein. Various forms of difference—gendered, ethnic, racial, classed, caste—thus can be understood as the tangible effects of these processes of both local and translocal encounters and a reworking of historically sedimented meanings" (Abe 2018, 191). Here, Abe draws a connection between the complexity

of individual subjectivity and the ability of music to resonate in a way that considers place as a mere geographical delineation is insufficient.

Koichi Makigami, a vocalist and multi-instrumentalist exemplifies syncretic and multilocal music and identity making (Makigami Koichi 2016) (figure 3). His career is both local and international. However, his focus on Japanese regional folk music as well as folk musics worldwide call into question the very "notions of space" that are often assumed to be geographically based. For Makigami, his music making operates in a space—focused around various folks music traditions with inflections of contemporary experimental music—that is not based in one country. It is a syncretic and rich space, individual and local, spread across times and locations.

Makigami's music comes forth from twentieth century Japanese music, Japanese and worldwide folk musics, and Western-originating experimental music. "I'm not that interested in playing with world famous jazz or classical acts. I'm always more interested in working with local musicians, folk musicians, wherever I am." Though he is primarily a vocalist, he plays a number of instruments including trumpet, *shakuhachi*, theremin, jaw harp, and electronics. His music is based on a variety of regional musics yet it refuses categorization or regionalization. His music is made up of the circulations of global musics. It is both folk music and avant-garde music.

"I first discovered improvised vocal music when I was touring in New York and England as an actor right out of high school." Makigami then sought out vocal music traditions from around the world, most often through improvisation. "After I became interested in in Tuvan (Khoomei) throat singing, I learnt Russian and starting using those techniques in my music as well." He is also part of the throat singing community within Japan and takes part in concerts and

events within that world. Makigami has become part of the Tuvan musical community and is also part of the growing worldwide popularity of Tuvan music.[13]

Makigami's interest in Japanese music also reflects his desire to learn from small scale musics. He plays *shakuhachi* but primarily uses extended technique in his many performances (figure 4). Makigami is also an expert in the little-known Japanese jaw harp tradition and has studied its history through archeology, echoing the work of many twentieth century Japanese musicians and composers who sought new sounds from a supposedly preindustrial, premodern past including Toshi Ichiyanagi and Toru Tsuchitori (Ichiyanagi Toshi 2007). He has helped to create a new musical genre based on the resurrected Japanese jaw harp tradition. Makigami's work with jaw harps is also both local and international; he is part of an international community of musicians and hobbyists devoted to protecting their various jaw harp traditions.

Makigami also exemplifies how Japanese experimental musicians perform not just with other Japanese musicians and Western musicians, but increasingly with other Asian musicians, building cultural and social identities across geographic, ethnic, racial and genre lines. Due to burgeoning experimental music scenes in Indonesia, Myanmar, China and Korea, Japanese and other Asian musicians collaborate with each other in each other's respective countries (Menus 2018), calling into question the cultural influence of Western metropolises like New York.

Yet despite Makigami's interest in various international musics, his identity as a Japanese person is very regional. He lives with his farmer parents in a small village. He swears by the medicines from his local traditional medicine specialist that he brings on tours to Europe. He is in a band with friends from his high school days. Makigami's approach too perhaps exemplifies his regionality He has a genuine appreciation for regional and indigenous musics. And yet, I am

not aware of him focusing on issues of the politics surrounding him partaking in these traditions while maintaining his own experimental musical practice. For example, the Ainu are famous for jaw harp music but I am any comments Makigami mentioning regarding that.

Makigami's unwillingness to stick to one musical genre or style while continuing to hold a very regional identity is reflective of the malleability of music and identity in the twenty-first century. Makigami creates a syncretic musical world, a resonant space, and a syncretic musical identity through his disparate use of sounds.

Ikue Mori: Ethnography of Gender and Music

I meet Ikue Mori, the New York based electronic musician, at Cafe Mogador in New York's East Village—a hangout for downtown experimental musicians—one November afternoon (Barzel 2015, 28; Mori and Yoshimi 2015). The cafe is a few blocks from the apartment Mori has lived in for thirty years. Mori is already seated and chatting with Yoshimi, her frequent co-collaborator and drummer from Osaka.

The previous night, the duo performed at the experimental music venue Roulette, in Brooklyn. Mori, in all black, with her hair down, sat behind laptop screen and started slow, low drones coming forth from the darkness. Her whole manner anti-performative, her presence urged the audience to focus solely on the music. Yoshimi came out in a hood, hiding herself from the audience, enhancing the mysterious quality of the performance with her presentation and costume. She took her seat behind her drum set, at the front and center of the stage. It was only in the final part of the performance, a cascading crescendo of drum rhythms, that Mori joined Yoshimi on drums, and was fully in the spotlight, her face illuminated.

Mori, who is a 2022 MacArthur Fellow, is deeply immersed in New York, and particularly its "downtown" scene and music culture (figure 5). She has lived on the city's Lower East Side since 1977 and has been integral first to the no-wave and then to the downtown experimental improvisation scenes since then (Rodgers 2010, 73). "I moved here with my boyfriend but stayed by myself. First I played with the no-wave band DNA, though I couldn't play drums." Mori began to use drum machines to play with improvising musicians. Now she is a pioneer in computer music using live signal processing, pre-recorded samples and synthesized sounds. She also creates puppets and video art to go with her music.

Meanwhile her career and identity are made up of circulations between New York and Tokyo. She frequently performs with Yoshimi, Koichi Makigami and other Japanese musicians. She chose to perform drums again, at the gig at Roulette, for the first time in many years because she turned sixty, a lucky birthday in Japan which allows for new beginnings. Her mother lives in Japan and Mori goes back every year to visit and perform.

Mori, perhaps more than any other musician I interviewed, exemplifies the deftness with which Japanese experimental musicians must navigate circulations between people, places and sounds to form their own musical and cultural identity. In particular, as a Japanese woman musician, Mori, and Michiyo Yagi, must navigate racial and gendered assumptions about her music and being, both in Japan and abroad. Work by Ellie Hisama and others have shown how contemporary avant-pop and experimental music rely on orientalist, and especially gendered tropes (2004). Simultaneously, Japanese gender essentialism is hegemonic in its own right. In every performance, Mori performs and creates her identity and music by distorting these extant tropes, stereotypes and social expectations.

Mori also exemplifies a broader historical trend of Japanese women artists coming to New York in order to feel less burdened by the patriarchal gender norms of Japanese society (Yoshimoto 2005). From Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama in the 1960s to Ikue Mori and the dancer Eiko Ohtake in the 1970s or electronic musician Keiko Uenishi in the 1990s, to pianist Hiromi Ueda or *koto* player Reiko Kimura in the twenty first century, there have been many female artists, who have moved to New York in order to create and feel less constrained. Mori's life as an expatriate Japanese, a New Yorker and an avant-garde artist is one way in which to be a Japanese woman. Mori's career is also in some contrast with Yagi's, who left New York after a short stint, while Mori made her career in the city.

Ikue Mori's collaborations also reflect her multi-layered identity and musical career. Yoshimi says, "One of the reasons I first became a drummer was because I heard Mori on a DNA record. The harsh yet free sound, made me want to be a drummer." Later, John Zorn introduced Yoshimi to Mori, and since then, the two have collaborated. They have performed in Japan, the United States, and at festivals in Europe. They play experimental music and are unwilling to follow typical Japanese female behavioral codes; they form a kind of anti-feminine Japanese duo. At the same time, Mori also often performs with fixtures of the very regional New York experimental scene. Mori has long been a part of Zorn's Electric Masada group, which plays Jewish influenced jazz and improvisation (Barzel 2015, 128). Thus Ikue Mori's collaborations are reflective of her circulatory musical and cultural identities. Through her performances, she constructs an identity as an experimental musician, and a regional New York performer with deep ties to Japanese musical communities. Her career is based on constant circulations of music, people, audiences, and recordings. Her career is local and contingent on the ups and downs of the New York experimental music scene, yet it is also international. She is

both intimately connected to Japan yet has not lived there for forty years. It is precisely this contrasting set of identities and groups that Mori is part of which make her a pioneer in twenty-first century musical creation.

A Big River of Music

Saxophone player, Akira Sakata, notes that: "There's a big river between Western and Japanese music that can't be crossed. Except, sometimes by Japanese musicians" ("Sunday Feature - Jazz Japan" 2019). Within Sakata's seemingly paradoxical statement, lies one answer to part of what this paper has tried to tease out. One definition of Japanese music then, is music made by Japanese musicians, who threaten to cross the river between Eastern and Western. Embedded in its nature is instability.

Japanese experimental music highlights how regional music making has adapted to globalization, and also suggests how music will be shaped and consumed in the coming decades. Japanese music continues to be vibrant, ever-changing and ever-evolving. Japanese experimental music suggests a pattern for twenty-first century local musical production that may actually reinforce distinctive local scenes and styles, and allow musicians to take advantage of the flexibility of international circulations. These circulations in turn, distort and feedback, creating marginal, vibrant musics and identities embedded on the edge of hegemonic structures.

The musicians I featured show that music can both be a site of identity formation and a place of deep cultural instability. My argument has been built on a generation of ethnomusicologists who have shifted the center of Japanese music studies away from rarefied research on so-called traditional Japanese musics and into the realm of popular and experimental

musics, which has allowed for the interrogation of post-war Japanese myths of purity. In this paper, I have synthesized existing literature and used granular ethnographies to show histories that were seen as peripheral or were previously non-legible. As shown by the artists whom I have discussed, there are many ways to be a "Japanese musician". There are those who were born in Japan, choose to live abroad and collaborate with both Japanese musicians as well as those who have moved to Japan or those who play Japanese instruments. Listeners too perform their identity through listening to music. This identity in turn is shaped through the circulations that have profoundly changed musical creation in the past fifty years. Through the movement of people, recordings, artists, audiences and performances, music and identity are and will be created and shaped. These circulations, especially on the periphery, the feedback, threaten postwar Japan's monocultural and monoethnic myth.

Notes

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[1] For examination of improvisation as an interdisciplinary force, see (Lewis and Piekut 2016). For focus on improvisation, as well as experimental music, see (Monson 1996) and (Nyman 1999). For research on free jazz, see (George Lewis 2008).

[2] Here, I cite Pemberton's classic text on performing Javaneseness through gamelan, because there has been little research done on how traditional Japanese music is intertwined with Japanese post-war identity.

[3] Potentially undoing 150 years of European influence on musical education.

[4] I focus on New York, though similar patterns existed in cities throughout the world. However, all three musicians I focus on had differing degrees and types of career connection to New York. Thus, the city functions as one way to understand Japanese experimental music.

[5] There is, a little known history of middle class *hi-imin* 非移民 (non-immigrant) Japanese who studied and worked in New York in the 1890's through 1920's. (Sawada c1996.).

[6] Toshiko Akiyoshi and Sadao Watanabe, are two preeminent jazz musicians who in the immediate postwar era worked in Japan, then received scholarships to study jazz at Berklee College of Music (Watanabe Sadao 2019).

[7] After the Gutai Movement, the rise of post-war art in Japan was swift. By the 1960s, intermedia collectives had proliferated. (Kaneda 2015; 2012).

[8] Shoichi Yui was one of the most prolific radio hosts in Japan throughout the post-war era. (Yui).

[9] For an example of how journalism impacted artists' careers in Japan, see translation of a 1969 Swing Journal article on Ornette Coleman's Artist House. This 1969 article specifically encouraged reed musician Kazutoki Umezu to visit New York and try to play with his idol (2015).

[10] This new shift happened not only in New York, but in Los Angeles and other Western metropoles as Japanese musicians travelled extensively in the '80s.

[11] Throughout the next three case studies, I draw extensively from the interviews I conducted with each musician.

[12] She is still technically a fee-paying member but has taken part in no performances and does not get any of her students through the school.

[13] The increased appreciation for Tuvan throat singing and revitalization of the genre both within the Republic of Tuva has brought about questions of authenticity, ethnicity and indigenous rights cultural rights (Glenfield 2003, 33).

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