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Time, Virtuosity, and Ethics Otherwise: Queer Resonances for Diasporic Play

presented by

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Date: May 5, 2021

Time, Virtuosity, and Ethics Otherwise:

Queer Resonances for Diasporic Play

A dissertation presented by

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to the Department of Music

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Music

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2021

Dissertation Advisor: Vijay Iyer Rajna Swaminathan

Time, Virtuosity, and Ethics Otherwise: Queer Resonances for Diasporic Play

Abstract

This dissertation and portfolio trace the dialogue between my creative work as an improviser-composer of the mrudangam, voice, and piano, and my critical engagements as an artist-scholar. The portfolio consists of three creative streams: (1) the music I have created with my ensemble RAJAS, featuring improvisers from multiple and intersecting cultural perspectives; (2) an open-ended compositional orientation called Mangal, and the interdisciplinary collaborations it sparked; and (3) commissioned pieces for Western classical and new music contexts. The dissertation weaves these threads together through three chapters that focus on, respectively: (1) the geographical and spatial (re)mappings that drive and emanate from intercultural creative practices, unraveling entangled notions of territory, identity, and embodied sound; (2) the social and ethical undercurrents of the archive, and the possibilities for conceiving of a more integrated and dynamic 'body archive' in artistic and academic spaces; and (3) the subtlety and playfulness of the body in queer relation to virtuosity, difference, and pleasure. Throughout the writing, questions posed by my creative practice find resonance in academic theory and its blurry border with poetry; questions that remain unresolved within the scholarly purview are expanded on through the music included in the portfolio. The resulting exchange offers insights into the shared responsibility of artists and scholars to cultivate pathways of study, creation, and pedagogy that foreground empathy and receptivity to otherwise modes of living, and the ways that such an openness can contribute to our own expansion and wellbeing.

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Acknowledgments

Through the love, energy, and labor of many friends and elders, an ecosystem was formed to make this work possible. I offer my gratitude to the people, places, and moments that enabled me to ask certain questions, for they are not obvious ones to ask. The conceptual threads that I play with here were not obvious ones to grow with and around. In my experience of both academic and artistic worlds, the sheer density of inquiry often leads to the humbling feeling that one may never truly understand the magnitude of these canons. It is my hope that this written offering stands as a testament to the continuities across the myriad ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the world, rather than to any monolithic network of knowledge. The external ideas I conjure in this writing represent the voices with which I have been able to thoughtfully engage. They speak to me with a clarity and intimacy that resonates profoundly with my own creative meanderings.

I acknowledge, with deep gratitude, the mentors — at Harvard and beyond — whose gracious presence, artistry, and scholarship have guided me through many creative environments and critical orientations: Vijay Iyer, Claire Chase, Braxton Shelley, Ingrid Monson, Sindhu Revuluri, T. M. Krishna, Gabriela Lena Frank, George Lewis, and Durba Mitra.

While these guiding forces illuminated ways to navigate the blueprints, it was through considerable emotional labor, which is too often taken for granted, that I was able to open toward life's apertures, to unravel and reassemble myself here. Thank you, Ganavya, for carrying me in my most tender moments, and for challenging me to anchor into my most honest voice in moments when my intuition was clouded. This work is infused with the expansive flows of our friendship and co-creations over the last five years, and I look forward to the continued resonance and deepening of our shared spiritual and artistic journeys.

It is in tandem with longtime collaborators that I honed my artistic voice over the years: Anjna Swaminathan, María Grand, Miles Okazaki, Amir ElSaffar, Stephan Crump, Aakash Mittal, Rafiq Bhatia, and Utsav Lal. I am also grateful to Adam O'Farrill and Anna Webber, who stepped in seamlessly as we set out to record new music amidst pandemic-related uncertainties. I am further indebted to those curators, performers, and institutions who encouraged my forays into writing and performing in Western classical contexts: Du Yun, David Bloom, Del Sol Quartet, Jennifer Koh, JACK Quartet, Lucia Lin, Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music, Bang On A Can, and National Sawdust.

I also extend gratitude to those who have offered me dialogue, respite, and inspiration at various points in my journey through this body of work: Yvette Janine Jackson, Esperanza Spalding, Yosvany Terry, Nancy Shafman, Laurie Lee, Anya Yermakova, Rekha Malhotra, Carlos Snaider, Imani Uzuri, Michael Schumacher, Anne Bourne, Ami Shulman, Nyda Kwasowsky, Phillip Golub, Peter Sellars, Chris Swithinbank, Anand Venkatkrishnan, Karen Andrade, Teju Cole, Anu Yadav, Zahyr Lauren, Sanam Petri, Viktor Ewing-Givens, Andrew Clark, Seiyoung Jang, Samora Pinderhughes, Weilu Ge, the Ucross Foundation, Brush Creek Foundation for the Arts, and the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

I am grateful to the beings who have formed a constellation of love and nourishment during this final year of completing my dissertation: P. K. Swaminathan, Ria Modak, Shireen Hamza, Eden Girma, Radhika and Gaya Gayatrinath, Dakshayani Vivek, Laila and Mike Davis, and Amanda Justesen. Finally, I honor those without whom I wouldn't be here, whose blessings I imagine to be emanating from the stars: my mother Lalitha Swaminathan (1958-2010); my maternal grandparents T. K. Nagalakshmi (1934-2009) and R. Rajan (1924-1988); my paternal grandparents Rajalakshmi Krishnan (1927-2020) and P. S. Krishnan (1922-2012).

Prelude

In this vessel, I have sought to imprint six years of my life as a musician and scholar. It is a tracing of who I am and the network of possibilities I am drawn toward, voicing an introduction to my ongoing creative process. This space also offers synthesis and points of departure, to be revisited over time for perspective and forward momentum. It is my hope that, across these uncertain rhythms of reflection and interpretation, the urgent and timely issues take the lead, for all of us.

As an artist-scholar, my work is entangled with a privileged history of music scholarship and elite music making practices. I write in awareness of a potential to asymmetrically valorize and silence ways of being, and a tendency to body forth a lofty sense of ethics, inviting a ripple effect of alignments. Many artists tread well-worn pathways of virtuosity, and we sincerely believe we are in pursuit of a noble kind of mastery. Yet we fail to listen in other ways, as our virtuosities are shaped by the formal and sonic hierarchies into which our bodies have been woven — structures that originate in skewed constitutions of the *human*, the *intellectual*, the *aesthetic*, the *musical*.

As I approach cosmic questions like time, virtuosity, and ethics through their resonance with queer and diasporic possibilities, I feel myself going against the grain of prior and recurrent aspirations, against the gravitational pull of the illusory and transient ‘good’ in the blur of life/music. Indeed, there is an alluring rush to synchrony, complexity, and versatility, as they help us cope with our increasingly enmeshed cultural worlds. We seek fluency at first, and then, at some point, it gives way to the pursuit of success of some kind. As a result, our archives and theories are teeming with examples and analyses of masterful performances. This leaves little

room to consider how we navigate vulnerabilities— ours and others' — with care and compassion.

From my particular experience at the intersection of privilege and alterity, I have gradually oriented myself toward a path of inquiry into the cracks in the foundation, excavating the potency of failure, refusal, and divergence. At the same time, I hold myself accountable for the changes I am able to bring with me to elite institutions and cultural spaces within which certain resources and professional trajectories have been made accessible to me.

Over the course of my time at Harvard, I have witnessed various callings and metamorphoses, within myself and in the community and institutional networks in whose midst I have worked. I came into this new program — Creative Practice and Critical Inquiry — on the faith that it would be an unprecedented space to read, write, and reflect on what I have to contribute to the world as an artist. My full creative spectrum was invited to come and play, such that scholarship could mean activating an intimacy among practices of researching, writing, composing, improvising, rehearsing, and otherwise being curious. At the same time, bridging these worlds is much easier said than done— along the way, I had to anchor myself with clarity across the overlapping goals of art music and academic spaces, and reckon with the difficult cultural asymmetries that undergird these modes of intellectualism.

When I entered the program at Harvard, I had several questions about how I could ethically occupy cultural space as a mrudangam artist, composer, queer woman of color, person of South Asian descent and privileged caste background in the U.S., and more. Seeking space and time to reflect, I was handed the keys to this highly regarded institution and its abundance of resources. In the process, I inherited the responsibility to make use of this access wisely. Luckily, I was

graced with friends and mentors that have helped me make sense of how to be a creative artist in this institutional space, with its enduring complexities and systemic habits.

Since I began the program in the fall of 2015, it would seem that the communities I have inhabited, and the world at large, have been through a few incredibly tempestuous years. This may be indicative of the historical moments we have been through together, including the Movement for Black Lives, the MeToo Movement, and the coronavirus pandemic; or it may be the spiritual growing pains of the better part of my twenties; more likely, it is a bit of both. Nevertheless, the last few years have, in my experience, shed light on the intense musicality of life, being, and movement. This writing is riddled with the intensity of these experiences, and with the urgency of love, honesty, and listening that has been signalled during this turbulent time.

Rather than settling for the unraveled knots I came in search of, I have encountered the importance of what I call *apertures*— spontaneous or intentional openings to the otherwise, born from gaps in knowledge, practice, and possibility. In my creative process, an attunement to apertures involves embracing states of uncertainty or surrender that enable us to receive alternative modes of being. I am drawn to the aperture for its sensory associations: as an entryway, as a channeling of light into an otherwise dark or enclosed space, and as a technology for curating focus, perception, and depth. The sources of uncertainty are seemingly infinite, but in my life, uncertain moments predominantly manifest in my body and desires as they navigate numerous cultural spheres, in the friction among inherited and adopted knowledge systems, and in the liminal experience of improvisation.

Uncertainty is distinct from its cousins, alterity and precarity, and is seemingly elemental to the inner workings of the universe. Of course, in the organic merging of personal, cosmic, and political forces, what is experienced as uncertainty in the moment may later be theorized as

alterity or precarity, in social and existential terms. Holding the vivid truth of such systemic entanglements close by, I hope to anchor into the transformative potential of uncertain moments, the ways they lead us to improvise a better world. In the optimistic view I develop in this space, I present the role of the artist as one that can transmute uncertainty of many kinds into a shared opening toward trust, a situated and relational movement toward love.

My desire is to contribute to the rapprochement between artistic and scholarly methodologies— for creative practice to be infused with a deeper social and ethical awareness, and for academic thought to experiment with a poetic futurity. There is no certain answer to any of the questions I pose here about my process— instead, I try to keep the revolutionary potential of uncertainty alive through my creative practice in the queer and liminal spaces of inherited fields. By modeling a path for studying one's own body and experiences as a creative, transformative force, I offer some possibilities for living and theorizing the interstices. It is my hope that the insights I lay out here will open up more compassionate modalities of existence, listening, and expression— for individuals of all walks of life and the myriad communities that connect them.

outer frame for the imagination

The context for this writing just happens to be a dissertation at this moment of encounter, but I am hopeful that it can be the beginning of a dialogue with you, as a unique reader and co-creator of what is to unfold from this point forward. I invite you to imagine these words as a story being told on a walk we are sharing together on a beautiful day, surrounded by lush trees, and majestic mountains. As we amble along, we talk in concentric circles, and the themes and questions deepen with each spiral.

We occasionally pause to take in some of the creative work I have compiled over the last few years. I am gently monologuing, but I imagine you feel comfortable enough to stop me at any point to interject with your own experiences and ideas. This is a dissertation, a form of expression that has historically been entangled with notions of rigor, proof, expertise, and defense. Going against the grain of such modalities of interpretation, I ask you to experience this whole offering from a personal and conversational stance, and through the many *textures*[1] that are alive within you: artist, scholar, conduit of vibration, and human being.

This dialogue with you is why I make music— what emerges from our social being-with-others can also be a profoundly individual resonance, and this enables us to create. It is never ours alone, and it eventually finds its way back to the collective realm. In a sense, we are stewards of these impressions, and what we choose to do with these resonances contains the force to shape our world and the people around us. The intimacy of such understandings and exchanges forms the undercurrent of everything that I share with you here. Whether you are reading, listening, or skimming through a fragment, I look forward to seeing how we unfold through these resonances over time.

inner contours of this vessel

The dissertation includes a portfolio of my creative work as well as a substantial written engagement, through which I trace the tectonic shifts that have driven my creative process. I expand on the ways I have placed my work in relation to the interconnected archival modalities of artistic and academic spaces, as well as the lessons I carry forward with me in my body and its shaping of my curiosity and practice. Some of the fields of inquiry that are interwoven here

[1] I am indebted to Karnatik vocalist T. M. Krishna for this turn of phrase— he once described being an artist as a *texture* that he would carry through the many other roles he would take on as a public intellectual and activist.

include Black studies, critical improvisation studies, queer theory / queer of color critique, ethnomusicology, South Asian and postcolonial studies, anthropology, and phenomenology. There is no preordained way to understand the dynamic relationship between these fields and the interdisciplinary forays of this dissertation. The writing is meant to be experienced in tandem with the creative work, in whatever sequence is most meaningful. The creative work is revealed in fragments throughout the writing— you are welcome to explore it in that sequence, or to consult the supplemental materials first and find a sequence that flows with your understanding and interest in the concept I address.

words

The three chapters illuminate the philosophical and ethical underpinnings of the creative portfolio, including the questions I have been led to ask and answer through my music, as well as the theory and poetry that guided me along the way. Each essay takes a distinct perspective on a core network of concepts and questions — time, virtuosity, ethics, being otherwise, queerness, diaspora, resonance, perception, and art music — revealing their entanglements in waves.

The meanings of certain terms become self-evident or remain playfully multivalent, but here I offer brief clarifications on my usage of *ethics*, *otherwise*, *resonance*, and *perception*.

1. When I discuss the *ethical* dimension of music and embodiment, I refer to the network of expectations and affects within which our bodies are taught— creating a dynamic landscape of possibility, virtue, and aversion. It is an embodied orientation as well as a yearning based on the unique set of values with which we live in relation. I use the term to attend to subtle ways in which musical ethics shape our improvised choices, and to imagine creative interventions that transform the ethical 'ruts' we inadvertently recycle in our practices. I begin with my own body,

as a space through which I can trace, with nuance, how the virtuosic expectations, disciplinary boundaries, and aesthetic hierarchies that live *within me* might shift.

2. The term *otherwise* refers to modes of being, perceiving, and thinking that are beyond the normative path, outside of what is thought to be possible. I often draw on Ashon Crawley's use of the term 'otherwise possibilities,' which describes the sounds and vibrations that require the spiritual stillness of Blackpentecostal worship in order to be perceived— this stillness is articulated as a detachment from normative sensory modalities (2017). Elsewhere, Elizabeth Povinelli has theorized an anthropology of the otherwise, which "locates itself within forms of life that are at odds with dominant, and dominating, modes of being" (2011, 1). For me, the notion of the otherwise overlaps conceptually with queer social and aesthetic trajectories, which similarly offer gestures of refusal and hope within normative modes of temporality, existence, and desire.

3. I invoke *resonance*, both in the figurative sense of striking a chord with people and in reference to the afterlives of sound and vibration. The associations arising from its usage to refer to a range of astronomical and atomic phenomena offer a welcome semantic layering.[2] Queer resonances offer a future-oriented possibility similar to what José Esteban Muñoz has described as *queer futurity*, in which "the gesture and its aftermath, the ephemeral trace, matter more than many traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics" (2009, 81). The implication of continuity in the term resonance helps point to the infinite exchange between theory and practice that is enacted through this dissertation.

4. Music *perception* has been a significant matter of interest in leading an intercultural ensemble and in exploring composition across disciplinary boundaries. What comes to the

[2] For instance, Crawley engages the notions of resonance in atomic particles throughout his poetic exploration of the undetectable sounds and otherwise perceptions that Blackness — as a spiritual and ethical orientation — renders possible through its attunements (2017).

forefront in such practices is the significant role of one's entire body (not just ears and brain) in navigating our relationships to sound, in our active engagements as performer-listener-creators, especially when we encounter something that is unfamiliar or unknown. In my discussions of perception, I draw on Vijay Iyer's (2002) writings on embodied cognition and perceptually guided action in music and on Nina Sun Eidsheim's (2015) conception of music as the practice and perception of vibration, as it becomes enmeshed with material contexts and racialized expectations. I also echo what Jason Stanyek calls the *intercorporeal* nature of intercultural music, referring to the perceptual particularities that emerge among differently situated bodies (2004). At the same time, I emphasize that, even outside of expressly intercultural situations, we regularly encounter novel sounds and movements, and are called to actively process and learn new pathways. This extends beyond the realm of what is normatively considered 'musical,' and into the environmental and social underpinnings of creative practice. As Gerald Edelman has put it, "every act of perception is to some degree an act of creation, and every act of memory is to some degree an act of imagination" (2001, 112).

essays

The first essay, *Blueprints*, delves into the geographical and spatial (re)mappings that drive my understanding of the intercultural creative practices I have been engaged in for over a decade. I trace the ways that my musical experimentations with my ensemble RAJAS and in other parts of my creative practice offer ways to unravel entangled notions of territory, identity, and embodied sound. In the second essay, *Apertures*, I explore the social and ethical dynamics of the archive through a unified concept of 'the Score,' thinking across the spectrum of ways we mark embodied possibilities, forming the 'body archive' of artistic and academic spaces. I discuss my contentious orientations toward notions of permanence, distilling strategies for curating apertures

within temporally situated tracings. In the third essay, *Play*, I investigate the body and its subtle movements in relation to virtuosity, difference, and pleasure. I conclude by considering our responsibility — particularly as artists and scholars — to cultivate pathways of study, creation, and pedagogy that foreground empathy and receptivity to otherwise modes of living. In particular, I offer that such an openness can contribute to our own expansion and wellbeing.

resonances

A *portfolio* is generally understood to comprise the tangible elements of one's work that can be archived into a representative collection. This writing offers some critical counterpoint to the assumed primacy and comprehensive nature of the archive, and to the notion of origins and ownership in the creative process. It would be impossible to even trace here the unruly and infinite resonances, the many dynamic scores and iterative recordings that formed through my practice, or the myriad improvisational impressions exchanged.

The portfolio, as I understand it, includes the whole spectrum of my creative practice and being over the last six years. I offer access to a sample portion of this spectrum in the supplementary materials that are included with this dissertation— select scores and recordings that serve as a vivid snapshot of the possibilities that have accumulated over the years. These archival elements are, to borrow from anthropologist Tim Ingold, the result of *incorporation*, not inscription — comprising "a pattern of activities 'collapsed' into an array of features" (1993, 162). This archive merely opens a window into what Ingold would call a creative *taskscape*.

The portfolio begins with my first record as a composer and bandleader of the ensemble RAJAS, titled *Of Agency and Abstraction* (Biophilia Records, 2019), which was recorded in December 2017. I trace my creative and critical trajectories since that time, addressing the concepts that shaped my work: at the prospectus stage (spring 2018), during a series of

residencies and workshops (2018-2019), and through the coronavirus pandemic in 2020— which limited possibilities for live performance while opening up virtual modes of creation. The latest addition to the portfolio is a suite for RAJAS, titled *Apertures*.[3]

One might consider the creative work following three overarching streams: (1) my work with RAJAS, (2) an umbrella project/process called Mangal, and (3) my forays into the sphere of 'new music,' and writing for Western classically trained musicians. My work with RAJAS has primarily involved my journey writing for an intercultural group of improvisers, variable in ensemble size, configuration, and personnel. With this ensemble, I have experimented with rhythmic strategies and improvisational textures that bridge concepts and sensibilities emanating from South Asian and African diasporic musical practices. With Mangal, I began to explore novel forms of notation and ensemble, incorporating queer and *otherwise* temporalities, virtuosities, and ethics into my practice. Mangal led me to orient around a wider community of artists, traversing disciplines. My writing for Western classically trained musicians began with a yet-to-premiere chamber ensemble piece for the LA Philharmonic, and a fellowship at the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music, for which I wrote my first string quartet. The past year and a half has seen the emergence of further opportunities to write for this cultural context, with some pieces featuring me as a performer and opening up further creative pathways.

The matrix of this accumulating creative work and the questions that continue to animate it are engaged at a greater depth in the chapters, revealing salient ethical principles that emerge in tandem with my research process and theoretical engagements. The various creative phases of this body of work are and will continue to be connected in nonlinear ways, encompassing several intersecting threads, loose ends, and cyclical processes.

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[3] *Apertures* was commissioned by Chamber Music America's New Jazz Works program and recorded at The Bunker Studio (Brooklyn, NY) in January 2021.

Chapter 1

Blueprints

I feel moved to open with a discussion of geographies — the *where* of our being, and the locally situated memories of music— and to tell you a story about where I came from, and how I arrived at this particular crossroads, existentially and musically. However, it would only be one of many possible narratives, and it is through grappling with this multiplicity that this chapter began to form. After all, I tend to inhabit *spaces-in-progress*, both in my life at Harvard and in my journey as a professional musician. In both artistic and academic spheres, it feels dangerous to talk about origins, even if we introduce a twist of hybridity.

I am wary of the geographical investments of both art music and academic spaces. Such attachments are predominantly meant to uphold expertise and lineage in fields that are otherwise teeming with the potential to shift paradigms of thought, interaction, and experience. What I hope to offer in this first essay is a perspective on our practices of mapping— the earth, ourselves, and possibility itself— and the ways that the resonance of music can invite new forms of relational movement and collective memory.

When it comes to the geographical dimension of music, sound is not only a force of memory— reminding you of a place in time, or a sense of an ambiguous *elsewhere*— but also a dynamic force of remixing our understanding of places and their reverberations through our bodies. *Sound*, like the travels of its practitioners, is about movement and change. To be involved

with music — as an improviser, composer, performer, or audience-participant — is to embrace this fundamental possibility in vibration.

As Tim Ingold has offered,

> "Sound flows, as wind blows, along irregular, winding paths, and the places it describes are like eddies, formed by a circular movement *around* rather than a fixed location *within*. To follow sound, that is to *listen*, is to wander the same paths… [T]he sweep of sound continually endeavours to tear listeners away, causing them to surrender to its movement. It requires an effort to stay in place. And this effort pulls *against* sound rather than harmonising *with* it. Place confinement, in short, is a form of deafness" (2007, 12, original emphasis).

However, sound doesn't just arrive to the ears— it is shaped by human motion, resonant spaces, and ultimately our perceptual and affective memory, containing sonic mappings of people, places, and environments along with related associations. It takes on irreducible and infinitely relational qualities as a practice of vibration, and is received by bodies as a whole, passing through and bouncing off of various materials (Eidsheim 2015). Place confinement is not deafness, but *perceptual stubbornness*. Such a conception transcends the assumed primacy of the ear so that we may understand sound's patterned and patterning effects on bodies as they listen and move in relation. Rendering ourselves impervious to vibrational wanderlust only happens when we cling to the blueprints of what we think we know.

Blueprints are somewhere between a plan and a map— to have access to them means you can likely understand how to build a space as well as how to orient yourself within it, how to navigate it with your body. A musical blueprint could be a genre category, a score, or an analysis, and it helps to focus on their provisional nature— sketches that cannot even begin to encompass the myriad possibilities and vantage points within a space, an embodied sound, or an ensemble texture. To see the blueprint as a point of departure would be to imbue it with a false sense of

origin. Like our individual interpretive paths, blueprints emerge in response to historical and cultural contexts, forming a nested continuum of mappings.

To understand our attachments to place and the accompanying habit of perceptual stubbornness, I address the fundamental blueprint of our dominant geography— also, ironically, a 'white' print on a blue planet[4]— and what it means to draw lines on the earth and expect its inhabitants to reflect those lines. As Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold suggest, there is a modern tendency to value the architectural blueprint over the everyday improvisations, which are often acts of care, required to maintain a structure over time (2007). In fact, those improvised acts have the power to transform the material properties of the space as well as the flows of dwelling within it, far beyond what is represented in the blueprint.

I consider this asymmetry to be similar to modern ideas of musical composition across cultural contexts and to the ways our dominant geographies uphold nation-states. Both are blueprints that have become violently reified through the rubric of ownership, permanence, and reproduction. When compounded, these nested blueprints reinforce one another and marginalize those who are marked by certain forms of alterity: the emergence of 'classical' musics around the world have exemplified this tendency. There is so much more going on— in the world and in music— than what is contained in these inherited ethical templates, but that requires shifting our focus and listening for nuanced possibilities that are *otherwise*.

[4] Perhaps further irony arises from the fact that the original nineteenth-century intention of blueprints (or cyanotype) in architectural design— which involved white lines against a blue background— was to allow a drawing to be easily reproducible and to render it difficult to make alterations.

diasporic dynamics

The permanence-seeking blueprints of nationalism have a profound bearing on experiences of diaspora. I draw on my experiences here as part of a voluntary diaspora— the Indian, and more broadly speaking South Asian, diaspora — which has had historically specific and nostalgic ties to nationalist movements 'back home.' I speak hopefully about *diasporic play* because so much of my own experience in the Indian diaspora has involved the weight of preserving cultural values and expressions against all odds, particularly ones that failed to be preserved in India. Vijay Iyer adds another dimension to this weight, conceiving of diaspora as a form of *improvisation*— in his words, one that involves "having to perceive, decide, and act under the watchful gaze of a suspicious and distrustful host culture, particularly intensified by the hypervisibility associated with racial difference" (2020, 771). In my music, I have searched for ways to alleviate this condition of multilateral heaviness, to eschew rubrics of authenticity and expectation that often accompany nationalist 'classical' music spaces, and to seek aesthetic possibilities that reject the binary logics of hybridity.

I have found creative momentum in Gayatri Gopinath's term *queer diaspora*, which she describes as "a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora" (2005, 11). Embracing this queer ethic has meant not only mixing cultural aesthetics but also leaning into the truth that the art forms used to uphold certain surface differences in fact involve a mixture of sounds and gestures drawn from many places and communities, over centuries and millennia.

I play the mrudangam,[5] a key percussion instrument in South Indian Karnatik music, the practice in which I was trained and enculturated. The instrument has its own geographical and

[5] The instrument name is variously spelled: mrudangam, mridangam, mrdangam, miruthangam, etc.

ethical stories to tell. It most likely traveled south through the expansion of Maratha rule in the seventeenth century, arriving from the central part of the subcontinent, bringing new forms of devotional singing and storytelling that were themselves likely influenced by cultural happenings from even further north.

The modern South Indian mrudangam has many precursors, siblings, and cousins,[6] inviting a mutually shaping network of techniques and rhythmic sensibilities, with innovations emerging from the artisans that made and fine-tuned their resonance, as well as the artists that incorporated the various ethics and sonic worlds of devotional music, temple processions, and dance performances.[7] There are broad regional resonances that emerge when considering South Asian rhythmic conceptions, which point to the rich travels of instruments and musical temporalities. As Richard Wolf offers, many forms rely on what he calls rhythmic *anchor points*, as well as the musical 'glue' of *laya*, which holds together articulations that may be variously "struck, plucked, blown, sung, or merely felt" (2019, 318).[8] I bring this up not to generalize, but to point to the ongoing scope of exchange, resulting in an interconnected aesthetic field that cannot be understood by available categories or blueprints.

In the last century, all of these musical practices and the instruments through which they resounded were further inflected by the collisions and assimilations erupting from British and European colonial presence on the subcontinent: the idea of Indian 'classical' music was born, along with the modern aesthetic taxonomies and hierarchies that claimed to set it apart from

[6] Some examples include the tabla, pakhawaj, madhalam, and khol. Variants of the word mrudangam are occasionally used to refer to a variety of instruments that are shaped similarly but have distinct resonance potentials.
[7] Karnatik vocalist, scholar, and activist T. M. Krishna has traced some of the aesthetic developments that were catalyzed by the Dalit (oppressed caste) Christian mrudangam artisan families (2020). The contemporary styles of playing mrudangam have been shaped in relation to *thavil* playing (part of temple processions), *bharatanatyam* (originally the nineteenth-century dance form known as Sadir), and *bhajan* and *harikatha* accompaniment (forms of devotional music).
[8] Truly, there is nothing 'mere' about feeling— it is the reason why all of these resonances live so strongly within our body-memories.

'folk,' 'devotional,' 'theatrical,' and 'popular' musical practices (Allen 1998). Given this intense history of encounter and exchange,[9] there is no telling what can happen when the mrudangam crosses oceans and finds new homes, settling into other ethical and cultural contexts through the queer and improvisatory forces of the diaspora. I have tried to keep this vast sense of aesthetic possibility in view in my practice, while contending with the very real geographical attachments that arise through the historical sedimentation of techniques and through enculturated perceptions linking sound and place.

When I formed RAJAS, I was in the midst of reorienting my approach to the mrudangam— I wanted to find a way to adapt my playing to improvisational practices outside of the Karnatik context. I already had some experience with the aesthetic multiplicity of the mrudangam because I performed regularly with bharatanatyam dancers, which involved a deeper attunement to gestural rhythms and to the theatricality of sound. My interest with RAJAS, however, was not to create a separate aesthetic stream but to study how my overall approach to the mrudangam could draw on a wider spectrum of sonic possibility.

I wanted to know what the mrudangam could sound like as a queer diasporic medium. In my experience, it has unfolded through a process of seeking ephemeral alternatives, apertures to the otherwise. This resonates with Sara Ahmed's discussion of queer worlds, which evokes a quality that is perhaps equally applicable to the notion of queer diaspora:

> "It is important that we do not idealize queer worlds or simply locate them in an alternative space… It is given that the straight world is already in place and that queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting. Our response need not be to search for permanence… but to listen to the sound of 'the what' that fleets" (2006, 106).

[9] Lakshmi Subramanian (1999), Amanda Weidman (2006), Davesh Soneji (2012), and Matthew Harp Allen (1998) have written extensively about the pre-colonial and colonially inflected modalities of exchange and rebranding that substantially shaped what we know as South Indian 'classical' music and dance today.

As the collaborative work of RAJAS grew deeper, I took an interest in the fleeting, ephemeral perceptions that offered a glimpse into a world that was otherwise, where borders and expectations were suspended. I was drawn to the power of such fleeting moments to confound and transform racial-geographical expectations, particularly stereotypical perceptions of Karnatik practitioners as being 'traditional' in relation to the 'progressive' and 'contemporary' practices of those trained in Western art music. In rehearsals and performances with RAJAS, I noticed an organic blurring happening when improvisers from different backgrounds played with the same musical material, stretching both form and its perceptions amidst careful, relational listening. In the ensemble sound, it often becomes difficult to delineate the boundaries of cultural approach— instruments and their associations become sources of unexpected sonic possibility and play.

In many ways, such blurrings reveal the entangled histories that connect our varied musical practices. For instance, the ensemble has often included my sister Anjna Swaminathan on the Karnatik violin.[10] Her playing often sparks a doubled confounding— her contributions to the ensemble texture were a vivid reminder of the complex travels of instruments and their practitioners, back and forth in new ways over time. Particularly in moments where the sound of the violin would intertwine with Stephan Crump's sinuous passages of bowed bass, a visceral geographical alchemy was set in motion.[11] When I began working with pianist Utsav Lal in 2018, further explorations of this nature were fueled. Lal's presence in the ensemble as someone trained in Hindustani music, Irish music, and jazz offered a sounding board for my own compositional practice with the piano, and how the nuances of my pianistic compositional approach could more directly enter the ensemble texture.[12]

[10] It is the same instrument as the Western violin, albeit tuned and positioned differently.
[11] Listening suggestion: "Tangled Hierarchy" from *Of Agency and Abstraction*.
[12] Utsav Lal's playing can be heard in the *Apertures* suite.

My work with RAJAS has been a window into the ways that the cultural encounters and concerns of the South Asian diaspora are deeply entangled with the experimentations and survival strategies of our asymmetrically colonized ancestors.[13] Core concerns regarding existential limits and possibilities are reiterated and negotiated in new ways, adapting to the times we are living through. In this historical continuum, postcolonial subjects have come to inherit what Julietta Singh calls the *countermastery* of anticolonial movements, which set forth new masterful ideals that were "aimed explicitly at defeating colonial mastery, in effect pitting mastery against mastery toward the production of thoroughly decolonized subjectivities" (2018b, 2).

In the case of Karnatik music, such practices of countermastery would simultaneously embody and contradict the cultural and aesthetic binaries that emerged in the colonial encounter. As Amanda Weidman offers, these binaries ironically echo colonial and Orientalist perspectives of the late nineteenth century: "Lining up 'written,' 'technical,' 'secular,' and 'instrumental' on one side and 'oral,' 'spiritual,' 'devotional,' and 'vocal' on the other," Indian nationalist discourses "map 'the West' and 'India' as musical opposites, destined never to meet" (2006, 4). As Weidman argues, such invented differences tend to mask the underlying and shared condition of colonial modernity, which has shaped both Indian and Western cultural sensibilities in parallel ways: both art musics have come to asymmetrically value the musical composition, to worship 'genius' composers, to notate and 'scientifically' standardize performance, etc.

There is a strong tendency for these practices of countermastery— these untenable investments in racial-geographical difference and cultural preservation— to become reanimated through diasporic musical practices, and through academic patterns of theorizing music. *How*

[13] I say "asymmetrically colonized" because, as someone belonging to the Brahmin caste, my ancestors likely had a distinct relationship to British colonization when compared with, for instance, their contemporaries who belonged to oppressed castes and other marginalized communities.

can my music and scholarship cut through such binaries without creating further layers of invented difference and countermastery?

This curiosity permeated my collaborative work with a few artists who were asking similar questions in their practice— it was in conversation with them that I found creative pathways that attended to this concern. Interrogating my practice in this way eventually led me to unravel some of my technical attachments on the mrudangam, to shift my ethical orientations in RAJAS and Mangal, and to imagine how I could compose for Western classically trained musicians. Through these creative channels, the challenge has been to pave a professional path while embracing alternative forms of virtuosity, opening myself to new kinds of ensembles, and resisting the sense of prestige that comes with inhabiting 'contemporary' Western art music spaces. I trace some of these generative collaborative conversations below, particularly as they came to shape my work with RAJAS and my orientation toward intercultural music making.

ensemble dwellings

If I were to create a map of where and how my music lives, where its threads emerge and connect, it might resemble the overlapping patterns in many of Julie Mehretu's visual artworks. Embracing the aesthetics of the palimpsest, her dynamic maps take shape through layers of agency, community, and memory, tracing worlds as lived through diasporic and cosmopolitan meanderings. Aptly, Mehretu calls them *psycho-geographies*, wondering how and why she may "recall Addis Ababa from Berlin" (Lewis 2010). It may be, as art historian Sarah E. Lewis offers, that "no matter where we now stand, we are never fully deracinated from the space we once knew" (2010, 220); it is also true that such perceptual layerings of place and memory are made possible through certain forms of mobility and listening, and by the activation of flows that have

always already been in motion. In my music, I try to curate and listen for queer moments where sonic place-memories can emerge and collide.

Confounding place-memory and expanding perceptions has involved a study in relation to experimental formations of community and reservoirs of cultural possibility. I have already addressed some of the historical exchanges that offer a kind of canvas or latitude for aesthetic and perceptual fluidity. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's meditations on the world as an inherited *dwelling* and the myriad ways our bodies become *oriented*, I consider the people, forces and formations that shaped the specific psycho-geographical layerings of my musical practice (2006).

As Ahmed puts it, "*we inherit the reachability of certain objects*," and this affects our mappings and, in turn, the ways we move (2006, 126, original emphasis). It could be as fundamental as inheriting the reachability of the mrudangam (through watching my father play), or as abstract as understanding one's proximity to specific sonic worlds and ensemble possibilities. Ultimately, I can tell a more honest story about my creative process through the lens of what, in retrospect, are profoundly *situated* reachings.

place-memory

In understanding how we come into an understanding of how sound and memories of place can interact, there is first the question of musical precedent. From the role of mid-twentieth century jazz ensembles in India (Fernandes 2012) to the influence of Indian music on Alice Coltrane-Turiyasangitananda, John Coltrane, and many creative musicians in the decades since their heyday, there have been many intersections between South Asian musical worlds and improvised musics situated in the West— particularly African diasporic musical practices. The myriad intercultural forays of Ravi Shankar, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Mandolin U. Srinivas, John

McLaughlin, L. Shankar, Zakir Hussain, and Vikku Vinayakaram have also paved a formidable path for how to dance in the interstices of these musical worlds.

However, my knowledge of such precedents was tangential to the music I was often immersed in as a child. I grew up listening to many kinds of music, but Indian classical, devotional and film music— particularly recordings from the 1950s-1970s— dominated the 'airwaves' of our home. The significance of the 'classical' stream became self-evident through the intensive modes of training and performance I experienced throughout my youth and into adulthood. I came to understand the indelible impression of devotional and film musics much later, as I attended more closely to the ways I approached piano, voice, and composition.

For instance, it was through Indian film music that I was introduced to the sound worlds of jazz, which film composers frequently drew on in their shaping of orchestration and affect. Other significant experiences included watching my mrudangam teacher Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman perform in sporadic collaborative concerts— primarily in university contexts[14] — with improvising musicians from various jazz and creative music circles. As an adult, I would come to work with a few of these musicians, which enabled me to begin engaging with creative music communities in New York.[15] What these nascent encounters offered was a way to imagine the sound of the mrudangam amidst novel forms of instrumentation outside of the Indian 'classical' context, the possibility for South Asian melodic sensibilities to be activated through Western notions of orchestration (particularly piano and strings), and the ways that affective landscape of iconic instruments like the saxophone and trumpet could be arranged to emote seamlessly with South Asian vocal affects.

[14] My parents, and particularly my late mother Lalitha (1958-2010), were involved in arranging these collaborative concert tours for Sivaraman, who would visit the U.S. to teach, staying in our house for months at a time.
[15] These musicians included saxophonist-composer Steve Coleman, pianist-composer Vijay Iyer, and percussionist-composer Dafnis Prieto.

Though I had access to these vast musical possibilities and memories growing up, in my upbringing within Indian classical music blueprints, I was often discouraged from such excursions into 'fusion,' which allegedly posed the risk of losing focus and rigor. I would find my way into liminal musical practices quite gradually, moving at the pace of my imagination and creative apertures, and floating through and finding resonance among various sound-worlds. I found that the most potent aesthetic shifts arose, not from a will to control or design, but through an attunement to the body and memory and their macro-temporalities of transformation.

The body tends to remember and retrace the ways in which it has been shaped, even if we aren't consciously aware of it. I am reminded of Toni Morrison's poignant illustration of the imagination and its relationship to memory, which I would extend here to the 'rush' of the body:

> "You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory — what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding'" **(1995, 98-99)**.

Beyond the personal process of embodied remembering, the image of flooding anticipates a shared possibility, a confluence: as I make room for my own imagination to flood, I simultaneously invite others' presences to flood in— composer, improviser, and listener enfolded into a collective remembering body. In this process of *co-creation*, our memories may drift through various spaces: the emergent rhythmic space of a groove, which exerts a force on physical breath and movement; the layered associations and affects of various sonic contours; dynamic identity-based affinities; the interpersonal relationships in an ensemble, etc.

The early immersive musicalities that I've described here are constantly reactivated in the multiple ways that music making plays with the memory. I wasn't very aware of the impact that

some of these musical experiences had on my creative expression until a couple of years ago, when I recognized a desire to shed residual notions of virtuosity and narratives of classicism that continued to shape my musicality. It was then that I began more consciously working with these early musical reference points. For instance, my yet-to-premiere chamber ensemble piece for the LA Philharmonic — *The Illusion of Permanence* — was largely based on a song that was dear to me as a child. It was a sixteenth century devotional poem in Hindi, arranged and recorded by the South Indian playback singer S. Janaki, and sung frequently by my mother Lalitha, who was a Karnatik vocalist. In retrospect, the intertwining of place, language, register, genre, and instrumentation was always in play throughout my upbringing. Allowing my memory-imagination to flood opened up new perspectives on who I could be as an artist, and the unknowable depths of the cultural reservoirs that surrounded me.

I'll now turn to speak about some of the collaborator-friends whose work presented tangible strategies, concepts and questions through which I began to orient myself in my experimentations with place-memory. Their music and philosophies constituted creative *dwellings* within which to grow and offered new networks of *reachability*.

patterns of relation

I spent most of my youth focused on the mrudangam, traveling to India and around North America to perform in Karnatik music settings— in concerts and dance performances. Though I had studied Western classical piano for nearly eight years, I was primarily self-directed — through listening to various kinds of music— in my approach to improvising and composing on piano. In 2012, I started to consider what I might do with my compositional forays, which had emerged in tandem with a practice of songwriting. Around the same time, I began to study and

collaborate with Indian-American pianist-composer Vijay Iyer, who would later become my advisor at Harvard.

Iyer's music[16] immediately resonated with me, offering a sound-world that played with and transformed familiar place-memories. It opened up new possibilities for articulating and expanding South Indian rhythmic ideas on the piano— strategies of rhythmic illusion and metric modulation offered integration and flow across seemingly incommensurate temporalities, which in turn sparked new perceptual pathways with which to approach my own geographical alchemy. Iyer introduced me to several improvisers in New York and included me in a few of his projects over the years, offering the space for me to situate myself within a broad spectrum of creative music ensembles and experimental ethics. In this way, I began to find a home in the creative music community through which I could situate myself as an artist and connect with others who were seeking a similar improvisational fluidity at the nexus of multiple aesthetic and cultural worlds.[17]

I continued my work with Prof. Iyer when I came to Harvard,[18] and I began to think more critically about how to articulate the social and ethical forces that shape my artistic curiosities and techniques. In my very first semester, I was introduced to the writings of Édouard Glissant in Iyer's seminar. I draw on Glissant's philosophies substantially throughout this writing— the Martinican poet-philosopher's profound concept of Relation as a mode of surviving totalizing forms of universality offers a nuanced model for theorizing aesthetic fluidity amidst inherited

[16] I was especially drawn to his album *Tirtha*, with Karnatik guitarist Prasanna and Nitin Mitta on tabla (2011).
[17] For some perspective on the intergenerational struggle to form an artistic voice amidst notions of tradition and identity-oriented stereotypes, see Iyer's collaborative interview/conversation with Indian-American saxophonist Rudresh Mahanathappa. Shortly before coming to Harvard, I collaborated and toured with Mahanthappa on a project, *Song of the Jasmine*, with the Minneapolis-based *bharatanatyam* company Ragamala Dance (Iyer & Mahanthappa 2006).
[18] At Harvard, we formed the Ritual Ensemble, along with vocalist Ganavya and saxophonist Yosvany Terry. The ensemble became an important sounding board for many of the compositions that came to be recorded with RAJAS on *Of Agency and Abstraction*.

social asymmetries. Later in this chapter, I address some of the implications of Glissant's thought in my work with RAJAS as an intercultural aesthetic practice.

Over the years, I also exchanged ideas with guitarist Miles Okazaki, who had studied the kanjira for many years, and whose music offered further engagements with rhythmic symmetry across South Indian, African diasporic, and Western classical perspectives. His musical approach and ethics are perhaps best encapsulated in how he describes his curiosity about musical practices from various parts of the world— to paraphrase his words, *they resonate with something that is already within us*.[19] He introduced me to the exercise of converting a *korvai* — a South Indian rhythmic composition that often serves as a cadence in an improvisation— into a harmonic ostinato form over which we could improvise. Okazaki's rhythmic playfulness on the guitar and his unique approach to musical shapes have been a bedrock for the improvisational experiments in RAJAS.

Of Agency and Abstraction reflects the cumulative effect of these and other community exchanges.[20] The *korvai*-ostinatos I explored with Okazaki would come to structure pieces like "Peregrination" and "Yathi."[21] Some of the rhythmic modulations in "Vigil" and "Communitas" resonate with similar strategies in Iyer's music. Alongside these 'reachings,' the ideas and curiosities I pursued during the first few years of working with RAJAS often flowed in tandem with other close collaborators— violinist Anjna Swaminathan, tenor saxophonist María Grand, alto saxophonist Aakash Mittal, and trumpet player Amir ElSaffar, whose music I discuss further below.

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[19] Miles described his approach in this way when he was a guest for the final 'happy hour' discussion session of my recent introductory course on Karnatik music and its unruly histories and futures, hosted by the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music (February 2021).

[20] See streaming/purchase link in list of supplementary materials.

[21] The word *yathi* refers to a rhythmic device of either expanding or contracting a shape, through additive phrases or adjustments to the space between notes. A *yathi* structure often appears in the first part (set up) of a *korvai*, while the second part (resolution) often includes the repetition of a cadential phrase three times for closure.

In these ways, RAJAS started to take shape as an ensemble through intentional experimental work within a community of shared ideas and perspectives. Through these friendships with like-minded improviser-composers, I eventually found myself curating musical frameworks and ensemble strategies that could encapsulate the various sound-worlds to which I was drawn. Together with the singular contributions of the many musicians that have played in RAJAS over the years, inhabiting the music often feels like an active remapping of the world. The intention is not to form yet another geographic blueprint for relation, but to reckon with the fact that— as Achille Mbembe puts it— *there is only one world*, and we share a responsibility for shaping it, and ourselves, through our exchanges:

> "This question of universal community is therefore by definition posed in terms of how we inhabit the Open, how we care for the Open—which is completely different from an approach that would aim first to enclose, to stay within the enclosure of what we call our own kin. This form of *unkinning* is the opposite of difference" (2017, 183).

As I searched for new patterns of relation, I sought this feeling of unkinning African diasporic musical practices and their creative apertures substantially embody this collective ethic and possibility, and have thus come to inspire so many cultural forms around the world, thriving as an aesthetic and cultural constellation. Such aesthetic circuitries are the undercurrent for Ashon Crawley's description of Blackness as an *orientation* that is ultimately "about the capacity for being moved, and about such movement-producing alternative ways of existing in worlds, alternative strategies that foundationally unmoor the seemingly settled nature of the normative modalities of thinking the world in Western thought" (2017, 56). Allowing for sound to move through and with us is a practice of surrender, of ignoring the blueprint, even if temporarily. This orientation in creative music— emerging from the collective work of artists in the Black radical aesthetic continuum—has offered me the spaciousness to attend to the nuances of perceptual

possibility, paving the way toward theorizing and mobilizing sustainable, dynamic geographies through my music.

I have spoken thus far about the realm of imagined possibility and movement— place-memories and novel compositional strategies that invite interstitial musicalities to be cultivated among communities of experimentation. Now I'd like to delve deeper into the challenge of reworking the geographical blueprints that live on viscerally within our bodies.

off the grid

Working within experimental ensemble configurations and playing with new compositional frameworks only represent part of the picture when it comes to scrambling inherited blueprints. Ultimately, these blueprints are alive in the ways we've trained and oriented our bodies, and we live in a world where we are encouraged to fit ourselves within these borders and categories— this pull is particularly potent in art music and academic spaces. Certain paradigm shifts flow in the way that Morrison described the artist's imagination flooding like a river— others involve an uncomfortable grappling with the ways we limit ourselves and others.

I am reminded of the way that Ahmed describes spaces being articulated through the body:

> "The 'here' of bodily dwelling is thus what takes the body outside of itself, as it is affected and shaped by its surroundings: the skin that seems to contain the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression… [S]paces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" (2006, 12-13).

Our bodies, our psyches— they *are* the palimpsests of Mehretu's paintings, and hence the site of the most profound and difficult processes of remapping. They are the 'second skin' that travels with us, unbeknownst to us even in our most experimental moments, surfacing to the consciousness in the moments when we find ourselves stuck. Moving out of the restrictive paths

of geographical blueprint involves actively working with the body to acclimate to new possibilities.

For instance, working with the piano as a compositional instrument offered new and exciting worlds, but it still took me time to feel comfortable performing and improvising in front of an audience, particularly in Western art music spaces. It was a struggle to shed the feeling that I wasn't, professionally speaking, a pianist— comments that were made along the way about my lack of training in harmonic theory, or that I should just stick to the mrudangam, only bolstered the already internalized feeling that I should reserve my piano playing for compositional purposes. Though *The Illusion of Permanence* is yet to premiere, the fact that I wrote myself a brief piano part— to be improvised while the LA Phil pianist would play a through-composed part— would have been unimaginable just a couple of years ago. It was through the encouragement of many of my collaborator-friends that I began to unravel this particular blueprint. Since 2018, I have more comfortably found my way toward improvising on the piano, in duo projects with Ganavya Doraiswamy and María Grand,[22] and in some of my explorations with Mangal. A similar process would occur with my practice of singing, but before I address that, I will speak to certain habits in my approach to the mrudangam that needed to be unraveled.

As I became enraptured with compositional possibilities, I also needed to figure out what role the mrudangam would play in RAJAS and other experimental ensembles. During my early experiences in New York, I would meet and collaborate with several drummers — Dafnis Prieto, Damion Reid, Marcus Gilmore, Tyshawn Sorey, and Dan Weiss. Since I rarely compose a part for the mrudangam in my music, I often grapple with what role it will play in the rehearsal room. Over time, I began to reimagine my body's relationship to the instrument, and what it would

[22] My duo project with Ganavya Doraiswamy is called Vajra, and my duo with María Grand is called Paracosm. In both contexts, I have moved between piano and mrudangam, and lending my voice at certain times.

mean for the mrudangam to take on the timbral shapings of the drum kit. Though I did not expressly try to imitate these incredible drummers, I tried to internalize an overall sense of their embodied patterning in accompaniment, which made an impression on my improvisational choices. These shifts accumulated with greater definition over time, shaping my percussive approach in intercultural musical contexts and in solo moments.

Aside from constructing more intricate rhythmic latticework— which can risk becoming another countermasterful, normative blueprint when taken to certain extremes[23]— I began to experiment with moving *off the grid*, so to speak. I gravitated away from the mathematically oriented blueprints I had been trained in (and become somewhat frustrated with[24]) and toward the flowing, speech-like passages I heard in the drumming approaches of African diasporic musical practices.[25] I made an effort to orient my rhythmically driven compositions toward this axis of motion. As I immersed myself in the ethical world of creative music, I gravitated toward phrasing, feel, and timbre intuitively with my body, emulating the visceral feeling and dynamic range that drum kit players would be able to bring into the music they played.

These shifts brought into question the entire foundation of how I practiced the mrudangam, which had been oriented around modular phrases that served as building blocks for improvisation. Indeed, for some time there was a disconnect between my practice habits and the range of rhythmic and timbral space I would explore in these experimental contexts. There was a pivotal point when the dissonance became overwhelming, and I stopped practicing the classical

[23] While I encountered rhythmically liberating strategies among various improvisers in New York, there was also a tendency among certain communities to make music that was intentionally challenging to play, as an absolutist test of what constituted basic musicianship.

[24] What began to frustrate me in the Karnatik performance culture, among other things, was the increasing obsession with mathematical virtuosity to the point of neglecting other aesthetic dimensions— this would often happen in a way that felt forced, and in many cases led to anxiety-ridden performances or tendencies toward showmanship, both of which decentered listening and care.

[25] Though one could say that Karnatik rhythm is 'spoken' because of the aural drum language-notation, (*konnakol* or *solkattu*), the rhythmic forms rarely leave the metric grid, except to offer a gentle lilt to an otherwise mathematically structured phrase.

vocabulary I was brought up with— rudimentary exercises that I practiced to keep up my 'chops' on the instrument. I feel I am still forming an approach to practicing that accommodates a wider expressive range, but it is currently oriented more toward emergent, improvised phrasings and intuitive work with resonance than it has in the past.

As I found a home amidst these improvised music scenes in New York and began to transform my approach to the mrudangam, I struggled to understand what my continued relationship to Karnatik music would look like. Whenever I would return to performing in a Karnatik context, the effect was double-edged— there was simultaneously a deep, comforting familiarity and a feeling of being in a classical straitjacket. I experimented with playing somewhat irreverently, gently allowing interstitial sound-worlds to color my approach to the mrudangam in Karnatik performances.

In 2014, Karnatik vocalist and activist T. M. Krishna asked me to perform with him in India. I knew of him as a prominent figure in the global community of Karnatik music, but I had not engaged much with his music, which had sparked some controversy. I came to understand some of the difficult questions he was asking of our shared musical heritage and community— particularly by lambasting practices of caste and gender discrimination and reorienting the aesthetic and ethical frameworks of Karnatik music. Beyond his political outspokenness, the controversy that surrounded him was centered on the modifications he was making in his performances to the modern concert format and to established modalities of improvisation. However, Krishna's goal was to put this contemporary practice in perspective by considering the erased histories of Karnatik practitioners who were historically marginalized— the *devadasi*-s, or

female hereditary performers, and the broader *isai vellalar* community— by the privileged caste Brahmin elites in South India.[26]

My friendship and study with Krishna taught me a great deal about how I might reckon with the aesthetic baggage of Indian classicism in my own practice, in my mrudangam playing and compositional process. In my performances with him, it felt like the blueprint I knew so well was actively unraveling— there was a spaciousness and openness to collective intention that felt unprecedented for Karnatik contexts and reminded me of the experimental temporalities and non-teleological approaches I had experienced in intercultural contexts and creative music. There was relatively more room to experiment with the mrudangam, because the atmosphere was not oriented toward a pre-ordained flow of repertoire and improvisation.

I also closely followed Krishna's activist work as he catalyzed the curation of festivals and performances interrogating caste-inflected urban spatial habits and inviting disparate artistic communities to gather and intermingle in new ways. It was clear that this wider spectrum of art forms had started to influence his approach to Karnatik music, shifting his repertoire and improvisational choices over time. Finding resonance in Krishna's perspective on how Karnatik music could *breathe* aesthetically and contend with its own cultural insularity, I felt that there was more to explore with the inherent pluralism of South Indian music.

Studying vocal music with Krishna offered an opportunity to learn the intricate possibilities of melodic improvisation in Karnatik music without the pressure to pursue a particular professional path with it.[27] Singing has been one of my earliest passions since I was about three years old, and in my youth I would often write songs, experimenting with various cultural

[26] For a deeper engagement with these histories of marginalization and the shifting patronage systems of South Indian music and dance, see Lakshmi Subramanian (1999), Davesh Soneji (2012), Matthew Harp Allen (1998).
[27] I made two intensive visits to India to study with Krishna in 2015 and 2016. Within a few days of starting lessons, Krishna encouraged me to start improvising — at first with *kalpanasvara* solfège passages and eventually *alapana* — which pushed me swiftly out of my comfort zone. I also studied a number of *varnam*-s and *kriti*-s during these lessons.

influences as I did with the piano. Taking these voice lessons taught me an immense amount about myself, and about improvisation and presence in the moment. It gave me some perspective on how this aesthetic blueprint could be stretched from 'within'— Krishna's experimental approach to *raga* contours was largely about attunement to possibility, which revealed new trajectories within what had often manifested to me as a rather restrictive form. It was another kind of movement 'off the grid,' reckoning with a whole world of melodic space and nuance that had been curtailed by the will to standardize and codify this musical practice.[28]

It was through this intensive work with Krishna, and particularly with the affective transparency of voice, that I began to wonder how our ethical struggles become audible through the musical sounds we emit, through the ways we listen and receive possibility. This revelation, coupled with a deeper engagement with African diasporic models of communication and testimony through sound, would come to orient my more recent work with RAJAS. I loosened my focus on structured parameters of form, instead seeking out how to create space for the emergent and nuanced forms of collective ensemble listening and relation.

fluid tongues

Though my work with Krishna shifted my outlook on my relationship with Karnatik musical aesthetics, it nevertheless took some distance from practicing Karnatik vocal music in order to reconnect with what felt like my authentic voice and its *situated reaching* within the ethical fabric of creative music. My voice has certainly been profoundly shaped by the sonic and affective contours of Karnatik music through years of immersion, but it has also absorbed the contours of many other musical worlds. In 2016, I began working with Ganavya Doraiswamy,

[28] Krishna often points to the development of the *melakartha* system as a source of loss in melodic nuance and specificity. The system, which was originally developed in the seventeenth century, codified *raga* contours into what Amanda Weidman has described as a kind of musical 'periodic table,' which was adopted more officially in the twentieth century to prove the scientific basis of Indian music (2006).

whose singular approach to interweaving worlds through her voice and whose practices of honesty and accessibility led me to meditate more deeply on my own voice as a site of experimentation, and on how to navigate the role of the voice in RAJAS.

Ganavya[29] has a background in Karnatik music as well as in the *varakari* lineage of Marathi *abhang* singing, a devotional form that often accompanied religious pilgrimages to the Pandharpur temple in the central Indian state of Maharashtra.[30] When I met her, she was engaged deeply in the practice of translating jazz standards into our mutual mother tongue, Tamil, occasionally combining them with various songs from her Indian musical repertoire.[31] I performed in ensembles that Ganavya led— a unique study in accompanying jazz standards on the mrudangam, which was a new experience for me. In retrospect, finding a relationship to these standards was like a missing piece of the puzzle, an introduction to the resonance among the many emotional reservoirs of creative music and Indian devotional musics. Prior to Ganavya joining RAJAS in 2017, I had only experimented nominally with having a vocalist in the band,[32] leaving much room for exploration.

Ganavya's auratic presence reoriented the ensemble significantly, and opened up the question that I had begun to ponder through my work with Krishna— how would I incorporate South Asian musical practices outside of Indian classical music into the ensemble textures and ethics of RAJAS? Faced with a sense of uncertainty, we started to work it out collaboratively in rehearsal. Since many of my compositions drew on Karnatik *raga*-s that had parallels in the practice of

[29] I refer to Ganavya by first name here, as she often uses it mononymously as her stage name.
[30] Ganavya's connection to the Marathi devotional practice came through a cultural resurgence of this music among Brahmin practitioners in Tamil Nadu. Independently, the recent incorporation of *abhang*-s into some Karnatik performances has also been a notable trend.
[31] Ganavya's album *Aikyam: Onnu* (2018) features these standards, sung back and forth in English and Tamil, intertwined with prayers, *abhang*-s, and Karnatik compositions. Her Tamil translations carefully consider and mirror the musical contours of the original English words, leading to a seamless movement between languages.
[32] Karnatik vocalist Roopa Mahadevan performed in the first iterations of RAJAS, when it predominantly featured Indian classical musicians. She also joined RAJAS for a couple of performances in 2015, and on these occasions, I had specially composed forms that could interweave with Karnatik compositions.

abhang singing[33]— e.g. Sindhubhairavi, Brindavana Saranga, Abheri — I began to create spaces in the ensemble texture for Ganavya's voice to enter, and she would intuitively arrange and improvise with a few *abhang*-s, or choose to sing without text.

Though the histories of Marathi devotional music and Karnatik music were already deeply intertwined, when Ganavya performed with RAJAS, it spurred a refreshing encounter with the Maharashtrian elements of mrudangam playing.[34] In this way, it invited a reckoning with the tensions between the 'folk' and 'devotional' associations of *abhang* singing and the 'classical' attachments of Karnatik music.[35] Furthermore, the entry of lyrics into the sound-world of RAJAS— whether the anti-casteist verses of the *abhang*[36] or the Tamil lyrics that Ganavya wrote for "Vagabonds"[37] — brought up important questions about the meaning and intent of this music. Ultimately, it led me to consider the voice as a potent site of affective fluidity in an intercultural ensemble, a path of inquiry that has become even more significant as I have begun to work more with my voice in recent years.

Until I began working with Ganavya's lyrical contributions, I had not thought of the music I wrote for RAJAS as communicating a specific spiritual outlook. I felt ambivalent about this dimension because the models of musical spirituality I had inherited were routinely weaponized to justify insularity and to suppress conversations about sexual harassment and abuse. The

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[33] As I learned from Ganavya, each *abhang* has multiple versions and melodic settings, allowing for an exploration of the same poem through the affective space of multiple *raga*-s. The word *abhang*, which means 'without end,' illustrates a cultural practice of continuous flow through poems and *raga*-worlds, with creative segues improvised by performers in the *varakari* practice.

[34] Listening suggestions: "Departures," "Ripple Effect," and "Yathi," from *Of Agency and Abstraction*.

[35] For an extensive discussion on how the discursive divide between 'classical' and 'non-classical' musical practices developed in South India, see Matthew Harp Allen (1998).

[36] The poets who composed these *abhang*-s were often from oppressed castes, and the devotional orientation of the *varakari* practice is toward a common spiritual force that dismantles distinctions of caste, class, and gender. See the liner notes to *Of Agency and Abstraction* for the Marathi lyrics, context and translation.

[37] "Vagabonds" was derived from a song I had written in my youth, which had English lyrics intertwining with the Karnatik *kriti* "Marivere gathi" (raga Anandabhairavi, Misra Chapu tala). When I adapted the piece for RAJAS, my English lyrics and the Telugu lyrics of the Karnatik *kriti* were taken out. Instead, I composed a melodic line over which Ganavya wrote the Tamil lyrics. See the liner notes to *Of Agency and Abstraction* for lyrics and translation.

neo-nationalist undercurrents of Karnatik music have usually centered the primacy of privileged-caste Hindu religious and spiritual practices.[38] In addition, the widespread worship of 'divine' performers and teachers has enabled the abuse of those who are most vulnerable.[39] This aspect of the music has also been the site of common stereotypical perceptions, and in my travels through Western art music circuits, I have frequently had to contend with the notion that all Indian music is spiritual or meditative in a monolithic way.

Aside from these points of contention, making music has certainly entailed a personal spiritual practice for me as an artist, a channeling of collective and cosmic forces that decenter the ego. The concept of *apertures* that I develop throughout this writing is an example of how this musical practice of spiritual surrender can simultaneously be a source of political and cultural transformation. Anthropologist Victor Turner has described this as the liminality of performance, when there emerges a fleeting formation of what he calls *spontaneous communitas*: an "intersubjective illumination" through which a group of people can "obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level," becoming "totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event" (1982, 48). My situated reachings have— consciously and through subtle processes of osmosis— drawn on the spiritual reservoirs of South Asian musical practices, creative music, and the broader spectrum of African diasporic musical practices, including their substantial influence on popular musics of the Global North. Being attentive to what these spiritual circuitries offer, even fleetingly, toward transforming oppressive blueprints has been central to my travels in the interstices of musical and ethical worlds.

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[38] I am referring here to the rise of the right-wing Hindutva, or Hindu fundamentalist, movement that has increasingly shaped the Indian political landscape in recent years. T. M. Krishna's political activism has largely been oriented toward posing challenges to the right-wing cultural tendencies of the Karnatik music establishment in India, and ameliorating caste- and gender-based perceptions and dynamics.

[39] Many of these abusive dynamics came to light in 2018, when the Indian music and entertainment industries experienced a wave of Me Too revelations and uprisings. In Karnatik music circles, many of the offenses took place in the U.S. and in other parts of the diaspora, where parents entrusted their children to prominent music teachers from India.

While playing with instrumental textures allows for moments of 'spontaneous communitas' to happen non-verbally, working with lyrics has involved confronting and subverting the intelligibility of language. In my intercultural work, I have often been oriented by what Édouard Glissant has called the *right to opacity*, the right to not be rendered knowable by the totalizing blueprints of modernity (1997). Composing for RAJAS has involved curating a shared access to opacity through perceptual sonic blurrings, but lyrical opacity has been a relatively recent study. In Mangal and the offshoot collaborative projects that came from that path of inquiry, the entry of lyrics became a practice of spontaneous memory flooding, arising in response to emergent associations and windows of possibility.[40] In *Apertures*, the latest suite of music for RAJAS,[41] I created three pieces that included English lyrics, two sets of which I wrote and one that Ganavya wrote.[42] Finding an intentional message with which to go inward— into what Roland Barthes has called the 'grain' of the voice, the material presence of the body in the voice (1977) — offers a first step toward a blurred realm between speech and sound.[43]

As I conclude this extended meditation on the deep study afforded by friendship with collaborators whose experimental curiosities intersect with my own, I want to circle back to Iraqi-American trumpet player, santur player and vocalist Amir ElSaffar, who has played frequently with RAJAS over the years. In 2014, I was invited to join ElSaffar's 17-piece

[40] This was the case in the sessions I held in Brooklyn in 2019, where a few of the vocalists spontaneously brought in lyrical or syllabic material to work with. In *ritual [moment]um* (2020), my work-in-progress with dancer-choreographer Nyda Kwasowsky, I began to spontaneously improvise with song lyrics based on the memory-oriented prompts and through an emergent process of association. The songs that came to mind included Karnatik compositions and old Indian film songs.

[41] Listening suggestions: "Mystery Suspended," "Altitude," and "Surrender Is Easier Said Than Done" from *Apertures*.

[42] For "Altitude," Ganavya contributed an allegory about the responsibility that comes with power and privilege, and the lyrics I wrote for "Mystery Suspended" and "Surrender Is Easier Said Than Done" harken back to the practice of songwriting in my youth, communicating personal revelations and nascent paths of spiritual inquiry.

[43] Spoken language certainly offers a different set of aesthetic parameters and geographical attachments when it comes to playing with perception in an intercultural context. In evoking the blurring of speech and sound, I am reminded of Fred Moten's description of the explosive sense of feeling and Black radical possibility in Abbey Lincoln's performance on *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite*, "where shriek turns speech turns song" (2003, 22).

ensemble Rivers of Sound, which featured myriad Western and Arabic instruments, along with the mrudangam.[44] The ensemble is aptly named in the way that ElSaffar curates an open-ended 'flooding' and fluidity of sonic memory, and the way he strives toward the ethics of *tarab*, a state of musical ecstasy akin to Turner's *communitas*. As ElSaffar describes it—

> "In the creative process, we learn the act of forgetting… Staring at bodies of water, particularly rivers, I observe a fleeting moment of an unending journey, layered streams moving simultaneously in different directions, different speeds, light's dancing refraction upon ripples that capture the sun and sky. I imagine the currents running deep below the surface, and I am aware of my eyes, reflecting the water, and we are no longer separate entities" (2017).

In the unruly sonic spaces that emerged through ElSaffar's musical curation of the collective, and in his own multidimensional improvisation on trumpet, santur, and voice, it often felt like we were approaching what Achille Mbembe has called "*a thinking in circulation*, *a thinking of crossings, a world-thinking*" — not only suspending the differences in perspective and approach but actively engaging them in the process of moving together and finding trust as an ensemble (2017, 179, original emphasis). In my recent work with RAJAS, I have found myself gravitating toward open-ended and chaotic spaces of encounter that are reminiscent of my experiences in the Rivers of Sound ensemble, particularly pieces like "Mystery Suspended" and "One," where densities accumulate and form potent intensities.

In thinking through these resonances between Rivers of Sound and RAJAS, I also wonder about the parallels between ElSaffar's fluidity among trumpet, santur, and voice, and my own recent discoveries in composing and navigating the embodied collisions in pieces like "Consilience" and "illuminance: scattered truths."[45] It is likely that simultaneously playing with

[44] Over the years, I have spent a great deal of time with ElSaffar and his music. Rivers of Sound recorded two albums — *Not Two* (2017) and a forthcoming album — and we have toured widely in the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East.
[45] Link to access "illuminance: scattered truths:" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKTZtRTcfPM

multiple modalities invites some perspective into the unruly spaces within the body, the parts that inspire a spectral (in more than one sense of the word) perception of aesthetic possibility. Ultimately, many of the paradigm shifts that I have outlined earlier in this essay— moving off the grid perceptually, working with novel compositional strategies, and seeking lyrical opacity— have all come to find significantly greater ease since I began working simultaneously with mrudangam, voice, and piano. Their integration into a compound instrument through my body enabled me to visit interstitial realms that were otherwise inaccessible.

In the final section of this essay, I turn to some of the ethical questions that have arisen as I work through these newfound geographic mobilities and their musical and professional affordances.

resonance otherwise: sound art and the commons

Composer-scholar George Lewis once asked me,[46] how would you pursue your music differently if you thought of yourself as a *sound artist*? In other words, how much do we limit ourselves because of prescribed blueprints of artistry and their hidden racial-geographical assumptions? At that time, I thought of myself primarily as a mrudangam artist and was still coming to terms with the label 'composer,' and had yet to explore how voice and piano would become part of my expanded performance practice. I struggled to understand what this general notion of *sound* could offer me that was different from the term 'music.' Of course, the term 'sound art,' like the term 'composition,' has its own unspoken codes and politics of membership, which is what Prof. Lewis exposed subtly in that teaching moment.

[46] This question was directed to me during a composition seminar at Harvard in 2017, while George Lewis was the Fromm visiting professor.

If we get down to the fundamentals, sound art could be defined, as I have written elsewhere, as "an offering of resonance or vibration, in the context of a community that might find something familiar, of aesthetic value, or socially cohesive, in the gestures and sonorities presented" (Swaminathan 2018). The vivid life of this offering cannot be contained within any blueprint— map, tradition, score, recording, or analysis— for they only draw what Nina Sun Eidsheim has described as the *figure of sound*, or the tropes through which "an ever-shifting, relationally dependent phenomenon comes to be perceived as a static object or incident" (2015, 2). Tim Ingold has posited that sound moves in ways that might invite a *meteorological* study—music as human-made weather that gathers us in places and attunes our senses (2007). Yet sound travels and affects us in ways that cannot be captured, measured, or described, much less predicted. Sound art, in this way, involves a surrender to the unknown and unknowable.

Recently, I have come to think of *resonance* as encompassing the lasting vibrations, interpersonal alignments, and the shifts in perceptual and spatial practice that live on within us after the music has stopped playing, that inform possibilities to come. Engaging with resonance involves a stretching beyond what we hear through the racial-geographical blueprints of sense perception. What I have described throughout this chapter is a series of ongoing collaborative interactions through which I continue to *feel* my way through embodied shifts in my practice. Ashon Crawley has compared the Blackpentecostal spiritual and sonic orientation toward *feeling something* to the stillness required to detect dark matter, asking, "What if instead of a particular sense, *feeling itself*—in all its messiness, in its radical abundance, in its refusal of containment—was the preferred way of detecting worlds?" (48). Crawley points to this ability to *feel* being mobilized through Black music, connecting with a world that is inundated with otherwise possibilities that go undetected by normative sense perception.

As my practice has felt its way into new realms of experience and connection, I have taken more interest in the alternative meanings of the word 'sound' in English, and how they can catalyze this focus on an art of *feeling*— arriving safe and *sound*, or even the *sound* we use to describe the strait that connects larger bodies of water. This semantic multiplicity renders the 'sound artist' as someone whose very medium is vibrations that keep us alive, cared for and deeply connected.

Just as my collaborative experiences opened up new sonic and perceptual modes of being an artist that transcend geographical blueprints, they also sparked more fundamental ethical questions about the persistent category of art music, its problems of accessibility, and the relational possibilities that tend to be overlooked in such spaces.[47] There is no 'one-size-fits-all' emancipatory solution to such issues, but I have tried to find situated gestures through which I might begin to interrogate my own perpetuation of exclusive practices. This path of inquiry has led me toward thinking in terms of the 'commons,' a term that refers to a physical or virtual space of shared access and responsibility, ungoverned by notions of property or ownership. When such spaces become increasingly rare, we must invent them, moving against the grain of inherited blueprints. As political philosophers Antonio Negri and Judith Revel offer:

> "The common is always in front of us, it is a process. We are this common: making, producing, participating, moving, sharing, circulating, enriching, inventing, restarting… Trace the diagonals in the rectilinear space of control: oppose diagonals to charts, interstices to grids, movements to positions, futures to identities, unending cultural multiplicities to simple natures, artifacts to pretensions of origin" (2008).

What would it mean to consider the fleeting quality of queer and otherwise worlds through the ethical notion of the commons? How can an orientation toward the commons bring forth a nuanced understanding of intercultural and interstitial aesthetic possibilities?

[47] I am especially grateful for my conversations with Ganavya regarding the problem of accessibility in certain paths of rhythmic countermastery in my compositional practice with RAJAS.

In 2017, T. M. Krishna released a song, "Poromboku," which is a Tamil word that originally referred to the commons— spaces in the city that had been categorized as 'unprofitable' land under colonial powers. The music video voices concern and builds awareness around the environmental crisis in Ennore Creek and the communal lands of Chennai, the contemporary global hub of Karnatik music. The word "poromboku" has come to be used derogatorily to mean "useless," and Krishna theorizes a connection between the loss of aesthetic commons and the pollution and extractive abuse of communities that inhabit the physical commons (Vettiver Collective 2017). He attempts to redress this in his myriad efforts to catalyze common, accessible spaces for the art forms from multiple communities— across caste-based and religious divides— to intermingle and share resonance in intentional ways. These curation efforts specifically pose a challenge to the spatial and aesthetic habits of the privileged-caste practitioners and audiences of Karnatik music. As Krishna writes:

> "These exercises, at least momentarily, force high art to shed its unfair sheltering. As a society, we must find room in our cities, towns and villages where we can allow for this contact between the arts, artists and heterogeneous groups of people. Public spaces become pivotal to this conversation" (2018, 62).

In addition to influencing Krishna's own musical practice, these movements toward communal aesthetic and urban space reignite the ways that musical forms would travel fluidly among cultural spaces — rural and urban; temple and court; dance, theater, music, and ritual — prior to the modern consolidation of Karnatik music into a classical form, with its attendant countermasteries. This is not to idealize those past modalities of aesthetics and cultural exchange, but rather to point to the existence of a transformative common within the folds of cultural memory.

The common layers and folds of our dynamic lived geographies are activated through revolutionary processes of remembering and forgetting, a queer *temporal drag* as Elizabeth

Freeman has called it, an inundation of the world to the point where we exist in archipelagos (2010). For Glissant, this is the way forward into a future oriented by Relation:

> "We become aware of what was so continental, so thick, weighing us down, in the sumptuous systematic thought that up until now has governed the History of human communities, and which is no longer adequate to our eruptions, our histories and our no less sumptuous wanderings. The thinking of the archipelago… opens these seas up to us" (2020, 18).

Thinking with these oceanic commons in mind, I began to sketch out possibilities for the Mangal project— with 'mangal' bringing together meanings in both Sanskrit ('auspicious timing') and English ('an assemblage of mangrove trees').[48] Since its inception in 2018, the project has since unfolded in an array of interdisciplinary experiments navigated in conversation with the artists involved and the improvisational worlds they bring into the space. These explorations have invited me to think of composition— across the many settings in which I practice it — not only as an architectural blueprint, but also as its own island, from which we might swim toward a world that is otherwise. How can a composition sustain the rush of our collective floodings? The art of composition can be thought of as an approximation of possibility, as a path that has been or could be traveled, as an inherited dwelling itself. To inundate such a structure with the dynamic nuances of the body is to embrace the living moments and to attune ourselves to a Relation that is "made up of all the differences in the world and that we shouldn't forget a single one of them, even the smallest" (Diawara & Glissant 2011).

Understanding my music making in relation to the commons has also invited me to question how I relate to and distribute these composed dwellings and the newfound perceptual pathways that emerge from intercultural and interdisciplinary practices. In the territorial orientations of

[48] Inspired by the writings of Édouard Glissant, the hybrid imagery of Mangal — chaotic and serendipitous multiplicity — is intended to drive how rhythm, ensemble texture, and temporality are approached in musical directives and improvisational guidelines.

art-worlds and academic spaces, it becomes especially crucial to avoid the self-congratulatory label of ‘contemporary’ or ‘intellectual,’ as though accessing certain perceptual spaces or cosmopolitan mobilities endows one with greater relevance and rigor. For my practice, this has meant avoiding contentment with a particular virtuosity of the interstices, and being aware of tendencies toward *hungry listening*, a term Dylan Robinson has used to vividly describe settler colonial modalities of perception that hoard possibility (2020). Being simultaneously *in* and *of* the West and multiple degrees removed from its dominant cultural modalities, my creative work exists within a matrix of ethical implications and responsibilities. As I explore in the next chapter, surviving in this matrix has involved forming a critical practice of the score, a privileged locus through which blueprints and their attendant expectations are mobilized.

Chapter 2

Apertures

Apertures open out, away from the actions demanded by the lines on the page or worked into the muscle by habit, toward a singular articulation of sound — the trademark of our body, flesh and breath, making its uncanny presence felt in the world. Gestures of expansion, they create space to accommodate the unknown and the unknowable. Apertures hold the potentials of our queer resonance, our diasporic play— the very possibility of our vitality. They may arise unbeknownst to conscious processing, by happenstance, or through practices of intention.

I am drawn to the physical metaphor of the aperture as a gap in creation and knowledge— through which we may invite a channeling, an entry of light or intensity into an otherwise closed or controlled space. As with the aperture of a camera, I am drawn to the perceptual depth that may be afforded by such channelings, which embrace ways of knowing and listening that are curious to rearrange our ways of being and desiring. Apertures also allow the imagination to engage with what Ashon Crawley calls "the good vibrations that are posited as unable to be heard" (2017, 52).

We shift here from oceanic fluidities to dealing with the earth, layers of rock, and the traces we leave behind. Apertures are an invitation to create in terms of what Édouard Glissant has called an *aesthetics of the earth*, an "aesthetics of rupture and connection" — abandoning notions of territory and succumbing to seismic shifts (1997, 151). In Glissant's archipelagic world, otherwise possibilities arise from the margins— through the mysterious fecundity of the

silt, the "castoff of matter" and the "residue deposited along the banks of rivers, in the midst of archipelagos, in the depths of oceans, along valleys and at the feet of cliffs— everywhere, and especially in those arid and deserted places where, through an unexpected reversal, fertilizer gave birth to new forms of life, labor, and language" (Mbembe 2017, 181).

In this chapter, I explore how our practices of writing ourselves into existence can leave room for the eruption of these apertures. Conceiving broadly of the ways I mark my presence in the world as an artist-scholar, I have found key resonances between critical or analytical writing about music and the notation or recording of music, both being entries into an archive that has the power to frame future perceptual pathways. Zooming out further, I would consider sound, the movements from which it arises, and the writings that shape its resonance, as forming a fundamental notion of Score— the wide spectrum of ways we mark embodied possibility. This is distinct from the lower-case score, as visual notation of a musical or choreographic piece, which is one possible expression of the Score.

The Score encompasses elements of musical archive that guide perception — notation, recording, pedagogical materials — as well as what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called *habitus*, the bodily dispositions we inherit through our upbringing and surroundings, and which I would extend to musical enculturation and training (1977). While such a conceptual grouping of disparate practices may seem drastic, these modes of transmitting ways of being through time and across generations are considerably unified when theorized as *gestures*. Plunging into the entangled life of such gestures in my creative process has revealed apertures that can transform an array of intentions, desires, and ethics.

As with Chapter 1, I continue to investigate inherited systems and otherwise possibilities, this time as they manifest in the performative life of embodied traces, grammatical markings, and

underlying desires for continuity. Drawing on my own experimentations with various aspects of the Score in my creative practice, I offer some ways in which we might, through apertures, stumble upon a kind of studied irreverence, a multiplicity that can be channeled between lines of ink or grooves in the body. From the blueprints and dwellings of the first chapter, I hone in more intimately on the power and latitude with which we imbue our traces of sonic potential, the ways we leave room for the full breadth of being, and its thoughtful refusals. This essay is a study in how, *through something, we might arrive at everything.*

sustainable specificity

Theorizing the multidimensional Score has been necessary to my movement across creative and scholarly contexts, particularly in ameliorating my contentious relationship with notated scores, audio recording, and the rigid elements of pedagogy, which share a common goal— to preserve and transfer knowledge and ways of being through time. Though the written word and embodied practice— what performance theorist Diana Taylor describes as the twin modalities of *archive* and *repertoire* — have been differentially valued within the violent flows and aftermath of colonial modernity, it is more productive to consider their insidious entanglements than to uphold a false binary (2003).

My own early discomfort with Western notation was largely due to the ways it was framed in ethical opposition to the concept of an *oral tradition*, the modality that is discursively claimed by Karnatik music communities. In reality, much of my training in mrudangam involved a notation system to record and commit stroke-patterns to memory. Even without this written notation, the 'drum language' of *konnakol* (or *solkattu*) essentially performs a similar function, rendering mrudangam phrases as a series of onomatopoeic syllables. As I began to experiment with my

approach to the mrudangam, I came to distance myself from using konnakol, as it no longer felt relevant to the novel polyrhythmic and timbral phrasings I was increasingly drawn toward.

Similarly, in my early compositional practice, I would resist working with scores, finding Western notation to be imbued with a stark and overbearing quality, and unable to satisfactorily accommodate my evolving rhythmic perspectives. In my early work with RAJAS, my scores were quite skeletal and practical— I thought of them as rough translations of the music that I felt more vividly and confidently in my body and memory. I would often limit the score to the essential frameworks so that improvisers could focus their attention and imagination on other possibilities. In rehearsals, I would spontaneously and verbally offer some improvisational directions, with certain sections being worked out collaboratively.

My compositions for RAJAS often involve layers of music that are presented as possibilities or parameters, and we work as an ensemble to find a flexible approach and sense of direction within what are often cyclical and polyrhythmic forms. Each musical framework or section can become a world unto itself, a vessel for interaction that gently expands the potential of the notated forms. As the bandleader, I often stand at the helm of the organic metamorphosis of a piece over time, with multiple iterations transforming its flow and expressive potential. The music often moves at the pace of musicians' expanding relationship to it and to one another, and spaciousness has been paramount to the improvisational arc. As the ensemble configuration has shifted over time, we are often faced with the collective responsibility to find balance between notated paths and new contextual apertures.

Initially, I found it challenging to conceive of how Western notation, or any other system of representation, could encompass the perceptual range of a dynamic and intercultural ensemble like RAJAS. My attachment to the malleability and evolution of this music also caused some

trepidation about creating a studio recording with the ensemble. Eventually, as I planned to record *Of Agency and Abstraction* in 2017, I found myself orchestrating and notationally defining several segments of the music in order to condense what would have otherwise been longer, meditative movements in live performance. This process of commitment and specificity was double-edged — it simultaneously yielded new possibilities for sculpting the ensemble sound as I prepared to work with the largest iteration of RAJAS yet (a septet),[49] while calcifying certain compositions and compromising on their open-endedness.

I noticed a feeling of loss as we performed these pieces after the album was released in 2019. It felt as though the music had become encumbered with attention to cues and repetitions that limited open-ended listening. Some sense of collective trust was lost in the process of committing these forms to the archive. As much as I wanted to blame this loss on the process of notating and recording, there was much that had been gained in these acts of archival, and I was optimistic about cultivating a more sustainable practice of specificity. This optimism was mobilized through the key recognition that archival was not the culprit, but rather the various relationships, desires, and hegemonies we have formed around this practice over time.

It would take an active and intentional reorientation toward notation and recording to prevent the pitfalls of calcification. As Alexander Weheliye offers, the separation of sound and source is an illusory one, "not as an originary rupture but as a radical reformulation of their already vexed codependency, which retroactively calls attention to the ways in which *any sound re/production is technological*," applying across recording and playback mechanisms, musical scores, and the human body (2005, 7, my emphasis). I began to reckon with the possibility that, even without audio recording and notation, and even in an intercultural setting where there are no common

[49] Until that time, I had mostly worked with groups of four or five musicians. Though the core ensemble in *Of Agency and Abstraction* was a quintet, there was a central suite of music that often featured seven musicians sounding together.

prerequisites of training, the body can calcify through habit and act as a 'playback mechanism' for sonic yearnings. Instead of clinging to the entangled dichotomy of body and inscription, repertoire and archive, I reconsidered the ethical underpinnings and desires of my musical practice, and investigated my attachments to various kinds of *permanence*.

textile / tactile

Between the recording in 2017 and the release of the album in 2019, my creative practice had started to move in new directions. I took a break from RAJAS and began envisioning a new project called Mangal, which brought a fresh perspective on what compositional specificity could look and sound like. With Mangal, I conceptualized what it would mean to *queer* notions of temporality, virtuosity and ethics through score-based practices. On the one hand, it was an expression of my interest in the idea of the *commons*, as explored in Chapter 1, emerging from a desire to embrace a broader spectrum of ideas and experiences. This involved meditating on whom my notations and compositions tended to exclude and how I could work to make them more inclusive and accessible. On the other hand, it was an opportunity to transform my approach to the archive, and to ideas of permanence. This involved sketching an alternative notational ethics and imagining otherwise embodiments of score-based practice.

Each composition for Mangal was a conversation with my perceptual and aesthetic curiosities, and how they might be shaped for open instrumentation. Conceiving of novel and alternative formats for notation and improvisation felt somewhat ad hoc in the beginning, and there was a risk of conflating this newfound autonomy with a sense of direction. Eventually, I became more comfortable with having Western notation coexist with some focused visual

counterpoint— text, graphics, contours, and other alternative representations of sound, anything that could help offset the inherited primacy of the notation.

Composing in this way involved a kind of soul-searching about my relationship to form, process, and music making. It was a shift in perspective from the aesthetic curiosities that had shaped *Of Agency and Abstraction*, though certain compositional strategies continued to travel with me. It was also a challenge to briefly part with the intimacies and unspoken ethics that had started to shape RAJAS, particularly through our collective familiarity with certain kinds of rhythmic structures and improvisational arcs. By the summer of 2019, I had compiled a new set of compositional fragments, many of which moved in unfamiliar directions with regard to specificity and agency. Each piece staged an experimental encounter of notation, concept, and process. I wanted to workshop them with a wider community of artists than I had worked with in RAJAS, so that I might learn from the possibilities that emerged from the music being navigated and stretched through new creative energies and trajectories.

I sent a call out to several artist friends based in New York— longtime collaborators, artists with whom I had not worked extensively, and some new acquaintances. I invited musicians of various backgrounds as well as a few artists from other creative mediums to the Scholes Street Studio in Brooklyn for a handful of informal but focused sessions over the summer. I set up the sessions such that people could come and leave freely depending on their availability, so the instrumentation was often in flux. For every session, I would bring in some new material to work on— I was challenged to spontaneously attune myself to the interactions unfolding in the room, choosing pieces carefully for each moment and the particular group of people gathered.

In the following months, Mangal continued in pursuit of new gatherings— in accommodating this range of rehearsal and performance contexts, I did not arrive at a notational

practice that was 'universally' applicable or democratic, but rather found apertures to compose and curate with openness and care. By the end of 2019, Mangal had taken shape in a dozen unique configurations, ranging from duos and trios to an ensemble of nine at one of the Brooklyn sessions, with public performances taking place in New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Burlington, VT, Seattle, WA, Portland, OR, Dublin, NH, Northampton, MA, and Toronto.[50] These travels helped me to hear vastly new textural possibilities and to understand how artists from different backgrounds responded to specific language and subtle cues in the scores-in-progress.

The emergent practice of compositional specificity in Mangal embraced what Tim Ingold has called the *textility*, or interwovenness, of making, rather than the dominant *hylomorphic* model, where preconceived form is imposed on pliant matter (2010). Floris Schuiling and Emily Payne have thoroughly explored Ingold's textility-hylomorphism dyad in relation to an improviser or performer's relationship to (an)notational practices, theorizing the composer's score as one of many elements informing the emergent performance (2017). For me, the concept of textility is the gateway to a more fundamental disruption of the stability of the score, and to the profound permeability of notation to various modes of *co-creation*. It is not just a question of formal or expressive additions of specificity, but rather the possibility for a composition to become an *aperture*— a crossroads where bodies, memories, gestures, desires, spaces, and futures can collide and coexist.

[50] A list of artists who were part of Mangal: Janani Balasubramanian (writer, interactive media artist), Pawan Benjamin* (tenor sax), David Bloom (conductor), Samantha Boshnack* (trumpet), Anne Bourne* (cello), Joshuah Campbell* (voice), Joey Chang (piano), Kwami Coleman (piano, percussion), Ganavya Doraiswamy* (voice), María Grand* (tenor sax), Justin Gray* (bass, bass veena), Lisa Hoppe (bass), Utsav Lal* (piano), Zahyr Lauren* (live drawing), Germaine Liu* (percussion), Rekha Malhotra (a.k.a. DJ Rekha), Kelsey Mines* (bass), Aakash Mittal (alto sax), Ria Modak* (classical guitar), Linda May Han Oh* (bass), Miles Okazaki* (guitar), Ana Carmela Ramirez (voice, viola), Joel Ross* (vibraphone), Kavita Shah (voice), Carlos Snaider* (guitar), Zafer Tawil (oud), Tatyana Tenenbaum (voice, movement), Imani Uzuri* (voice), Fay Victor (voice), Jasmine Wilson (voice, poetry), Max ZT (hammered dulcimer). (* = artists who were part of a public performance of Mangal)

In my work with Mangal, and as I was called to write music for classically trained musicians, I found some creative momentum in thinking of the Score as a galaxy of *surface impressions*, Sara Ahmed's vivid metaphor for the mutual shapings that occur through affective exchange among bodies and worlds (2014). All modalities of the Score involve emergent, tactile knowledge through interaction with impression-shaped surfaces— the co-presence of other bodies, and physical or virtual renderings of an embodied imaginary. Conceiving of these presences as *surfaces* — rather than as objects, texts, or traditions — allows for situated, immersive modes of perception and knowledge to be in focus. Through the process of curating spontaneous and voluntary gatherings, opening up to interdisciplinary possibilities with visual and movement artists, and experimenting with my own creative boundaries as an artist, I found an aperture into new surface impressions through which I could know myself and mark my presence and relationship to my surroundings.

Surfaces are textured and dynamic, registering nuanced vibrations on an irreducibly tactile plane. They are also permeable and malleable, modulated by the forces of intention, affect, and power. Our multidimensional impressions on the world emerge from a set of desires that are difficult to disentangle from the ethical bearings of the Score. As I found myself engaged with various Score surfaces, I noticed that they were embedded in one another— for instance, notational practice often holds the expressive ethics of criticism, recording, analysis, and pedagogy within its permeable surface. They form an entangled web— our performance from a visual score is often shaped by the analytic framework of the notation, and there are often internalized recorded sounds that accompany our perception, which may further be molded by a teacher or collaborator's movements. It is through our cumulative interactions with these many surfaces, and the emergent matrix of ethical possibility, that we find our latitude of being.

Is our navigation of these matrices truly separate from what we call *music itself*? As George Lewis would often point out in his 2017 seminar at Harvard, and as I offer at the end of the previous chapter, sound art or composition can be as much about the structuring of form as they are about the ways that people are connected in space and time. In various Score- and permanence-oriented practices, it is not only form that can persist, but also the shapings of desire and perceptual possibility. Through my experiments with notation, I wondered how this affective space might be actively recognized, rather than slipping into the realm of the unspoken. In the process, I was drawn toward understanding the situated and embodied process of writing, which is its own microcosm of surface impressions, desires, and possibilities.

the politics of permanence

As I dove deeper into understanding my relationship to notation and the broader idea of Score, I simultaneously grew more aware of the impending task of committing these questions and creative experiments to a privileged and permanent archive— the doctoral dissertation. Being the first student in this new field of Creative Practice and Critical Inquiry, I had experimented with various tones of writing, in search of a style that could carry the vivid dialogue between my creative work and scholarly curiosities without circumscribing myself. The parallel processes of intentional writing in both academic and musical spheres led me to several insights about the permanence-oriented rubrics with which both scholars and artists exist in contention.

In my creative process, the act of writing notation has often involved a quasi-commitment to musical possibilities that otherwise live a beautiful, nebulous life within the embodied memory. They dwell and grow in that dynamic space, often for months before they reach something that

resembles a score. Even after committing these ideas to a score, I like to keep my options open, updating and rearranging the score. As described earlier, I would often take this approach with RAJAS, and many of the Mangal sessions were curated with this flexibility in mind. This method worked as long as the scores were used primarily for rehearsal or reference purposes.

I was eventually faced with the prospect of entering notation into a more 'official' archive as I began to receive a handful of commissions to write within Western classical rubrics, and as I approached the task of compiling a dissertation portfolio. As I gradually engaged more directly with the process of publishing and copyrighting *works* (a process that continues to baffle me), it gave me new perspectives on the inherited anxiety to produce stable 'paper-music.' Around the same time, I was contending with what it would mean to archive a narrative of my musical journey and the various theoretical engagements that (continually) shape it. Such multilateral movements toward archival are ultimately bolstered by a professional framework that renders them necessary as a means to an end— protecting one's intellectual property, fulfilling a contract, or earning an advanced degree.

The daunting finality of archiving notation and narrative felt distinct from the prospect of recording *Of Agency and Abstraction*. Audio archives are not assumed to be legible in the way that notated scores are defined by ocularcentric grammars. In the professional transactions of art music and academia, improvisation, even when recorded, is considered an ephemeral and intangible process, while (notated) composition is treated, akin to writing, as a stable product that can easily enter archives and be monetized. This divergence in treatment doesn't stem from the formal methods or temporalities of these creative processes, but rather emerges as a result of colonial/racist/capitalist hierarchies of difference and modes of extraction. Such systems rely on a notion of intelligibility, and have the skewed effect of enriching white artists and exploiting or

erasing the work of artists of color, particularly from Black and Indigenous communities. Glissant's conception of a *right to opacity* is powerful for this reason — it disturbs the settling of the totalizing archive, and re-mystifies these circuitries of intelligibility (1997).

In my work, the possibility of opacity has emerged through co-presence demanded by practices that take time. My experimentations have insisted on the temporal situatedness of writing and on the creation of forms that invite new layers of temporalities and perceptual experiences to come into play. Essentially, I have wondered, in this writing and in my notational excursions: What could notation and academic writing look like if they didn't pretend to be written at the moment of conclusion, but rather embraced the nature of their unfolding *at the time of crisis and questioning*? What would it look like to write *alongside* creative shifts and encounters? What would it mean to include apertures to otherwise possibilities in the markings of our presence in the world?

naming and claiming

In my movements toward an alternative ethics of writing and notation, it occurred to me that there is a dangerous irony in theorizing apertures while upholding the permanence of theory. Much of this risk hinges on the power of naming, which is mobilized through geographical blueprints and in the archive's temporal projections. Whether it is one's own name, the naming of a 'work,' process, intellectual trend, or movement, or citational practices— it is through such *performative* inscriptions and utterances that the archive comes alive as a set of relationships and power dynamics, allowing us to stake a claim in it (Austin 1962).

There is certainly a performative power to naming and theorizing a concept like apertures, particularly in what it can catalyze both for the one who names it and for the networks within which it circulates. However, putting such openings into practice more fundamentally involves a

process of surrender and self-effacement. Across art music and academic spaces, articulations of newfound fluidity or departure from prior paradigms — even those that propose supposedly 'emancipatory' projects — are often at risk for sedimentation and cult of personality. Nomenclature, and thus writing, can become a space to claim one's contributions as a point of origin with hopes for a genealogical continuity.

What I call *apertures* throughout this dissertation are essentially tectonic openings toward a deep improvisation with the unknown. The irony of theorizing apertures is contiguous with the irony of theorizing improvisation.[51] George Lewis has pointed to how the term *improvisation*, which holds associations with an 'Afrological' network of aesthetic experimentation, has led several white experimental composers to choose alternative words— aleatory, chance operations, indeterminacy— that effectively erase the influence of Black artists on their music and position their contributions in a pioneering light (1996). Marking a new name can lead to a process of erasure or embody new and unbridled possibilities. For this reason, many musicians in the 'Afrological' aesthetic lineage have rejected the limitations of 'jazz' as a genre category, instead pointing to a plethora of alternatives— 'creative music' being just one of the many terms to have gained historical traction.

I use the term *apertures*, not to distance myself from improvisation — which can live along a spectrum of situated ethical orientations — but rather to allow myself to excavate queer and otherwise possibilities in practices that are typically associated with permanence, particularly composition and notation. This experiment in perception unfolded through my work with Mangal and later in writing with Western classically trained musicians and listeners in mind— I share a few examples of these trajectories of potential later in this essay. Improvisation never lost

[51] In my first semester at Harvard, I took a course with Prof. Vijay Iyer titled "Theorizing Improvisation," in which we plunged into this irony, working through readings in Black studies, music cognition, and ethnomusicology.

relevance as a fundamental undercurrent to my practice, but there were other apertures that gained clarity— new paths of interdisciplinarity, notational interventions, and ethical and perceptual reorientations.

Form — whether sonic, notated, verbal, or recorded — moves in tandem with memory, perceptual experience, and the surface impressions we collectively and asymmetrically weather. Our ways of being and perceiving are quite fluid, to the point where the legibility of form is often put into question, but there is a gravity to naming this truth from a state of relative alterity as opposed to coming to this understanding from a position of relative privilege. This is the key difference between 'chance operations' and improvisation (Lewis 1996), between 'world music' and what Glissant calls "the arts of mixture, of adjustment to situations" (Diawara & Glissant 2011).[52] In what ethical contexts are such claims of fluidity made?

I am reminded of Alfred Schutz's description of what he calls *co-performance* in Western art music contexts, where there is a process of mutual tuning-in among performers and listeners, and in the process of making music together (1964). He asks whether the "vivid present" might be found *relationally*: "between the reader of a letter with its writer, the student of a scientific book with its author, the high school boy who learns the demonstration of the rule of the hypotenuse with Pythagoras" (172), going on to suggest that "the system of musical notation is *merely a technical device* and *accidental* to the social relationship prevailing among the performers" (177, my emphasis). This hopeful claim about the neutrality of notation is quite similar to what philosopher Gilles Deleuze has claimed about writing and academic theory, which postcolonial

[52] In an interview with Manthia Diawara, Glissant describes the undercurrent in the global circuitries of African diasporic musical practices and ideas: "Jazz came about not through a book but through a flight of memory. That's why jazz is valid for everybody, because it's a reconstruction within a distraught memory of something that had disappeared and had now been regained… The arts created by the Blacks of the diaspora, contrary to what's believed, are not indigenous to them; *they are the arts of mixture, of adjustment to situations*" (Diawara & Glissant 2011,f my emphasis).

literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak succinctly critiques in her famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?":

> "The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage. Thus Deleuze makes this remarkable pronouncement: 'A theory is like a box of tools. Nothing to do with the signifier' (*FD*, p. 208). Considering the verbalism of the theoretical world and its access to any world defined against it as 'practical' is irreducible, such a declaration helps only the intellectual anxious to prove that intellectual labor is just like manual labor. *It is when signifiers are left to look after themselves that verbal slippages happen*" (1988: 275, my emphasis).

Transposing Spivak's insights to musical notation helps point us to the slippage that occurs when markings on the score are *left to look after themselves*. It is not enough to claim that notation and writing are temporally fluid— we must actively create frameworks around these intelligibility-driven aspects of Score that mobilize alternative practices of engagement. If we treat naming and theorizing less as a means to an end, and more as a gentle invitation toward a shared potential for opacity, we have a chance at exploding our archivally motivated power struggles and arriving at a merging of being and writing, a kind of poetry.

I wonder if I might invoke *apertures* poetically— not to generate a litany of nested citations, but to honor a possibility and a force that I expressly do not own but with which I collaborate. In relation to the memory-oriented inundations of blueprints discussed in the first chapter, apertures are the eruptions that shift our landscape and shake up the traces we've attempted to leave behind. We might prepare ourselves for these tectonic shifts or attempt to stay in place, but ultimately they hold the potential to shake the very foundations of our world. I primarily engage with poet-philosophers throughout this writing in a hope to abandon, at least fleetingly, the will to control that permeates our hegemonic relationships to the archive. As Glissant offers:

> "This is why we stay with poetry… We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone" (1997, 9).

In this way, poetry offers a vivid modality through which unknown spaces and shared possibility can be articulated and summoned in our engagements with the Score.

circuitries of presence

In my artistic practice, I have learned much from the African diasporic ethic of *co-creation* — a dissolution of dominant cultural archetypes of the 'passive' receiver-consumer, the laboring body of the virtuosic performer, and the supposedly omniscient creator-composer. Co-creation renders opaque the Score's circuitries — the permanence-oriented residue of modernity, present across forms of sacred, popular, and art music — directing them instead toward a mutual responsibility for movements in shared time. As Georgina Born offers, African diasporic musical practices challenge the work concept, theorizing and enacting a framework of creativity that is *social, distributed, and relayed* (2005). The ethic of co-creation offers an otherwise modality of exchange, one that displaces circuitries of permanence for *circuitries of presence*.

Co-creation is not an exercise of leisurely imagination, but a labored and often risky reframing. It not only reworks forms and ethics; it also works to *undo and reveal* the dominant grammars of creation and social relation (Spillers 1987). Embracing co-creation involves, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten offer, a recognition of the "incessant and irreversible intellectuality" of "talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering" — what they aptly term *study* (2013, 110). This notion of co-creative study signals an accumulation of situated gestures and ways of knowing through and beyond the Score, shaping the force of the *body archive*. This body archive, as I see it, involves the modalities of the body

that archive the surface impressions through which we live, as well as the visceral, 'hauntological' presences of the archive (Derrida 1994).

In the following sections, I trace three paths I have taken toward notating in a way that embraces the force of the body archive, allowing it to become an aperture: (1) a text-based score that performs reflexivity about its own circulation in the archive; (2) a chamber ensemble piece that revels in the resonance of body archives and subverts the finitude and stability of the score; and (3) a new suite of music for RAJAS, created in and for the virtual paradigms of the pandemic era.

origins

I wrote my first (and currently only) text-centric score, "Origins," in 2018, and it was my first notational experiment for Mangal. The piece was largely inspired by a class on feminist theory taught by Prof. Durba Mitra, who introduced me to the idea of the *body archive*. My approach to writing the score was deeply informed by the work of the composer Pauline Oliveros. Through her scores, Oliveros offered to American experimental music a significant avenue of returning to the fundamentals of human relationships to sound, centering a spiritual attunement to interpersonal and environmental vibration through a practice called Deep Listening.[53]

Inhabiting a liminal space between notation and poetry, Oliveros' text scores were a transformative reference point for me as I thought through how to expand my own score-based

[53] Oliveros' approach to scores was informed by improvisational practices, meditation and movement practices like Tai Chi, and it holds resonances with her creative partner and spouse IONE's literary and dream-oriented creative work. I had the opportunity to understand more about her work at a Deep Listening retreat in August 2018, which was facilitated by IONE and movement artist Heloise Gold. I also experienced Deep Listening sessions led by Anne Bourne in 2019 during the Banff Centre residency for musicians, dancers, and choreographers, titled *Creative Gesture: Collective Composition Lab*.

practice to be more accessible and open-ended. Oliveros conceives of a democractic, participatory, and improvisational modality of performance, cultivated through actively listening for and imagining sounds in your own body, in the bodies that share space with you, and in the environment. In the various contexts in which I encountered them, these scores offered a — simultaneously new and distantly familiar — way to connect and improvise, through sound, movement, and contact, with people I had just met. Oliveros' scores have traveled farther outside of elite art institutions than the scores of her contemporaries, being incorporated across disciplines and levels of musical training. They also often occupy a temporal multiplicity— improvisers can often articulate gestures at their own pace, according to their imagination, leading to wondrous and unexpected sonic congregations.

At the same time, many of my encounters with Oliveros' scores also happened to take place in connection with privileged and predominantly white art and community spaces. This led me to wonder about the ways that archival circuitries might articulate the limits of democratic gestures. As Judith Butler reminds us, there is no innocent articulation of democracy or of its associated notions of "the People" (2015). A score (as notation, recording, or embodied practice) is always for and about the people who ultimately come into contact with it, who get to co-creatively, even if asymmetrically, shape its presence in the world. While my score for "Origins" does not resolve this question about the limits of distribution, it invites an awareness of the score's circulation and ethical demands on the body.

In "Origins," I ask the person(s) interacting with it to take a moment to acknowledge the conditions under which they came to encounter the score, and the historical weight that informs their performance. The score documents the layers through which it came into being, offering commentary on some of the hegemonic impulses of scores in general. For instance, I converted

some of the imperative verbs to gerund form, using a slash so that my initial impulse to command was still transparent. In other instances, I formatted it as strikethrough text, which simultaneously embodies rejection and endorses a vulnerability, an expression of the precarious temporality of the double take.[54]

The score also includes two segments of visual gestures that can be interpreted through multiple lenses. This serves as a reminder of the various ways we perceive, express, and relate to the visual realm, and of the reach of resonance into many aspects of being, ranging from breath and movement to imagined notions of collectivity-in-the-moment and relations-to-elsewhere. There is also an embedded understanding that each performance in some way informs future perceptual possibility, and to carefully approach what will be *a sensory palette for future generations.* The piece invites the co-creator to look away from or disregard the score at times, and invokes the play of memory and counter-memory in improvisation, which articulates a relational orientation.

The name "Origins" is somewhat ironically invoked, as the piece actually invites reflection on the ways in which the score is not an originary element, on how its performance comes alive within a continuum of gestures and relationships that extend beyond the limits of the physical paper. The score is ultimately an invitation to gather, and to simultaneously reflect on and resist the conditions of the gathering, with the many contingencies floating around us. In the segment that marks *referents for play*, I name some of these many contingencies: time, velocity, pitch, contour, dynamic, texture, People, experiences, memories, movements. In the middle of the piece, when it might form some kind of organic momentum, I purposefully inserted a call to

[54] These choices were mobilized by Prof. Vijay Iyer's comments on a draft of the score, which uncritically used verbs in their imperative form.

irreverence— to remember that *everything is ridiculous, including this score*— should anyone be taking it too seriously.[55]

Through these many strategies, the piece offered me a handful of ethical parameters through which I might gain some perspective on my own creative process and attachments to perceptual permanence, and to render them more playful and fluid. It was a way of documenting my situated understanding of music making while translating these situated modes of knowing into poetic blurrings that might become a creative aperture for someone else. I have performed "Origins" with RAJAS and various iterations of Mangal, and the score has engendered further curiosity from colleagues about other ways it might exist in the world.[56]

The end/continuity of the piece is defined in terms of a will to *survive* that is collective, relational, undefined and infinite. In most performances, I have asked my collaborators to blur the transition into or out of "Origins" within a set of music, in the hope that its mode of ethical questioning might be transferred to our engagement with other pieces. A similar idea of collectively navigated ending/continuity would find its way into my score for *The Illusion of Permanence*, to which I now turn, as I discuss how some of these experiments in Score-based irreverence can be applied in the realm of writing for classically trained musicians.

[55] The experience that informed this particular choice of words was a conversation with Ganavya, when I was expressing a significant anxiety or stress. She gently reminded me that *everything is ridiculous*, and it offered me some much needed levity. This kind of affective aperture felt like an apt way to undo the power of the score for "Origins." This opening also references Ganavya's musicality in many ways, particularly in the way she enacts her own unexpected textual into conversation with music that otherwise doesn't

[56] One friend suggested that I submit the score to a literary magazine as a poem. At the moment of this writing, I also anticipate a performance of the piece by Face the Music, a youth music program in New York, facilitated by my friend and collaborator Aakash Mittal.

the illusion of permanence

The major chamber ensemble piece I finished composing in early 2020, commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic for their Green Umbrella Series, was one of my first forays into writing for Western classically trained musicians. The piece, which would have featured me on mrudangam, voice, and (briefly) piano, was ultimately unable to be performed due to pandemic-related cancellations.[57] Much of what I offer here about *The Illusion of Permanence* emerges from the multifaceted process of composing and workshopping the piece, with the performance remaining suspended in a speculative space.

The idea for the piece emerged while improvisationally meditating on a beloved song from my childhood. The song was "Pyare darsan dijo ay" by the sixteenth century Bhakti saint-poet Meera Bai, and the specific melodic setting that my mother would often sing was composed by the prolific South Indian playback singer Sistla Janaki (popularly known as S. Janaki). The Hindi song had resurfaced while sifting through old cassette tapes at my great aunt's house in 2018— I had a visceral reaction to hearing my late mother Lalitha's voice entwined with my own voice as a child (I was around five years old).

There are particular contours in the song that move me, and I began to shape these impressions into melodic motifs in my compositional process. There was a magical and haunting nature to the song that opened up a deeper engagement with my body archive. As I went through the intense process of composing through and around this song-memory and the feelings it evoked, I sensed that this song had somehow traveled with me over the years, unbeknownst to

[57] The program, originally scheduled for April 21, 2020 at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A., was co-curated by composer Du Yun and conductor David Bloom, and would have also featured world premieres by Du Yun and Mazz Swift.

me, seeping into other parts of my musicality. The song served as an anchor, leading my memory to gradually reconnect with other fragments of music I had composed in my youth.

Meditating with this song gradually but substantially shifted my thinking about otherwise possibilities of the archive, and further complicated the question of *origins*— of embodied sounds, relationships to Score, and even how and why I became a musician. The result of some of these ruminations informs the reflexive storytelling in the first chapter, particularly in thinking beyond inherited blueprints. Julietta Singh offers a poignant perspective on the mysterious pathways revealed by this kind of immersion into the body archive:

> "Why this desire for a body archive, for an assembly of history's traces deposited in me?... The body archive is an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason. It is a way of knowing the body-self as a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter, of turning toward rather than against oneself. And vitally, it is a way of thinking-feeling the body's unbounded relation to other bodies" (2018a, 29).

Though *The Illusion of Permanence* began as a personal meditation, it would come to bring the body archives of other musicians into focus as well. Aside from the time spent in solitude creating sketches of the piece,[58] which held meaningful revelations for me, I workshopped some sections of the piece during the summer of 2019 with RAJAS, then with a group of musicians at one of the Mangal sessions in Brooklyn, and again with Prof. Claire Chase's undergraduate class at Harvard that fall. These in-progress iterations feel just as vital to the presence of these sounds in the world as the yet-to-be-rescheduled premiere. Desiring further engagement with these ideas and sonic memories, I eventually repurposed elements of the final movement of *The Illusion of Permanence* into a piece for RAJAS, titled "Surrender Is Easier Said Than Done," as part of the *Apertures* suite, which is discussed further below.

[58] This was primarily during the first of two residencies in Wyoming, at the Brush Creek Ranch (Saratoga, WY) in September 2018. The second residency was later that fall at the Ucross Foundation (Clearmont, WY).

Through its myriad iterations, the music has meditated on the resonant potential of embodied memory, drawing on the ways that refracted threads from the past and present continually morph within the body and imagination. The title describes the simultaneous sensation of loss and continuity that was sparked by my encounter with the tape recording and through its echoes in my body-memory. The writing of the piece did, after all, move in tandem with my inquiry into my archival attachments. It offered a space to investigate normative entanglements with preserving and reproducing sound in the archive, particularly in the face of the uncanny human capacity to carry, share, and transform sonic forms through time. The musical inquiry unfolds through the ten episodes of the piece, each embodying a slightly different relationship to memory, sound, and collective relation.

One significant component of the piece involves the part for voices, a voluntary element to be sung by any number of musicians for substantial portions of the piece (the option is open for wind players in specific sections). This was a way to introduce multiple or simultaneous pathways in the moment of performance, and to invite us into a space outside of what we might consider our professional obligations to an instrumental part. There are also sections of music that present multiplicity within the instrumental parts, using metaphors or graphics to spur the imagination toward vivid relational listening: galaxies, the ebb and flow of tides, petals unfolding. One of the ten episodes, titled *palimpsest*, can be internally rearranged by the conductor or curator— in retrospect, I would perhaps go even further and suggest that some of the instrumental parts in this section are interchangeable.

A second layer of intervention involves subverting the temporal grip that the Score can often have on the body of a performer— in this case it involved finding apertures within the framework of Western notation. In several places, I composed the timing of gestures to be

relatively fluid and responsive to the collective ensemble movement. I was interested in bringing out the sound of tentative relational movements to offset the precision-oriented ethics through which these notational practices have come to be shaped. Such temporal strategies allow a performer's attention to briefly, even infinitesimally, shift away from the reproductive impulse of the archive and live in the effervescent present.

Finally, the ending of the piece is perhaps the most radical departure within this aesthetic context, and expands on the strategy I used with "Origins." The final movement is the most notationally specific, and yet it unravels quickly, leading to an open-ended section. Here, the musicians transition into an asynchronous, improvised texture with gestures that they may place freely and intuitively. Then, they are invited to abandon their instruments altogether and find closure by improvising solely with a handful of vocal gestures.

The final moment of the piece is guided by the following text:

Listen, be, carry sound

As harmony, unison, counterpoint, drone

Embody and extend the resonance of the music

Move, reorient the body in space

Find a closing sound

That, in silence, lives on.

These words encapsulate an understanding that is already set in motion through more formally detailed notation throughout the piece. It is my hope that, when the piece is finally performed, the closing moment allows the musicians (myself included) to embrace the chaos of the form falling away, while finding grace and trust amongst the ensemble.

trace

Traversing these extensive experiments in sustainable specificity and body archive, I finally came to create a new suite of music for RAJAS, titled *Apertures*. The suite adapted some of the ideas I had explored with multiple iterations of Mangal, which drew on a range of notational strategies and sound-worlds. The music came together under unprecedented circumstances, being born amidst the COVID-19 pandemic— this timing offered a chance to reflect on the temporality of committing this music to scores and to a premiere performance that could only be conveyed virtually to an audience.

Envisioning *Apertures* as the culminating project of my doctoral work, I hoped for a sense of synthesis and closure with this suite. I asked a lot of myself in the process of compiling the music, some of which was driven by an attachment to the possibility of a comprehensive synthesis. *Apertures* was intended as a way to bring together multiple creative streams— the work with Mangal, my string quartet writing, the yet-to-premiere sound-worlds of *The Illusion of Permanence*, and my forays into singing and movement.

In the process of synthesizing, I found myself overwhelmed by the number of possibilities that presented themselves as I improvisationally meditated with the forms. It felt as though the floodgates of memory and kinetic potential had been opened in the process of having a more vivid connection with my body and with the apertures of the Score, and it was a struggle to contain the ideas and their multiplicity into a manageable set of forms.

To further complicate matters, there was much uncertainty around whether and how the music would be premiered, and with which musicians, amidst a global pandemic. It felt impossible to gather with the ensemble and rehearse in the way I had grown accustomed to— collaboratively moving through variations and collectively finding an arc together. I came to find

some solace in becoming reacquainted with the layers of rehearsal embedded within my compositional process, which combined various elements of the Score, accumulating layers of memory, and floodings of the imagination. Reflecting on the rehearsal in my compositions, I saw a pattern emerging across the range of pieces I had created for various situations and ensembles.

At the time when I was compiling *Apertures*, I had written numerous pieces for Mangal, two string quartets, as well as a few solo and duo pieces for new music and Western classical contexts. My writing often formed in a way that merged improvisational channelings, internalizations of recorded iterations, repeated explorations across multiple instruments, and actively remembering particular inflections and impressions from workshop sessions or co-creative moments of performance.

What emerges is a *writing-through-time* and a *writing-through-body*— writing as an accumulation of temporally situated gestures and surface impressions, a writing with its own microcosm of a body archive, its own apertures. Renee Gladman's poetry offers deep insights into these gestural and ritual dimensions of writing:

> "I was writing down the idea 'I no longer wish to write' by writing down that I was writing it down. I wanted a threshold to open that also would be like a question, something that asked me about my living in such a way that I could finally understand it. I couldn't understand why my days unfolded the way they did and why they took me away from writing. I was writing, 'I no longer wish to write,' repeatedly, and in making this gesture uncovered distant, repeating scribbling from my childhood: 'I will not tell a lie,' 'I will not leave the top off the peanut butter,' 'I will never raise my voice.' Each declaration filling tens of pages, and this was a kind of writing, similar to what I believed I'd been doing for some time — a writing so as not to write, so to find the limit (that last line) beyond which the body is free to roam outside once more" (2016, 40).

I wondered what it would mean to find such a threshold in my own creative process and specifically in *Apertures*— a portal through which I could simultaneously face this accumulation of expressions and allow my body to 'roam outside once more,' as though the gesture of

committing these forms to the archive could viscerally lift a weight off of the body, allowing it to move on. Perhaps that is the project of this written dissertation as well, to trace these revelations so that I can move in new directions.

What eventually emerged, answering some of the questions that had been raised in the process of recording *Of Agency and Abstraction*, was a perspective on composition that embraced the particularities of its gestural path as just one set of possibilities, one iterative example, or even an approximate path around which improvisers could arrange themselves according to their flow and desire. I was aware of composition as a modality of pedagogy, as a way of guiding bodies to move and sound, and wary of its potential to become an overbearing blueprint. This was another dimension of sustainable specificity— not just a compositional method that could enable trust and co-creation to be alive, but also a modality of marking presence into the archive that invited multiple pathways to coexist and accommodate one another.

I have come to call it a *composition (or pedagogy) of proximity*— one that does not demand precision on formal terms, but expresses an already layered and multivalent possibility that could be engaged with and built on in numerous ways. This idea of proximity manifested in the details of the score; in many of the pieces in the *Apertures* suite, I created sections that are illustrated by contours, fragments, outlines of rhythmic space, or descriptions of texture and intention.[59] The improvisers carefully expanded on and found their own relationship to these gestural pathways as we set out to record. In some ways, the lack of rehearsal time[60] and knowing that what we

[59] Key examples include the raga contours of "Charcoal," the fragments of melody in "Altitude," the visualization of rhythmic space in "Precipice," and the textural and intention-driven sections in "Mystery Suspended," "Surrender Is Easier Said Than Done," and "Astral Osmosis."

[60] RAJAS only had one full ensemble rehearsal for what amounted to about ninety minutes of recorded music, recorded in a single day with only one or two takes for each piece.

made would immediately be recorded into the archive brought both a focus and a daring into the space.

Thinking of the whole endeavor through the lens of proximity allowed me to feel, more than ever before, that I had offered something of myself for the ensemble to get to know, simultaneously inviting them to articulate their own embodied nuances. There was a balance found in what Gladman calls "*naming with impermanence*, seeing objects as in the middle of some process, and understanding your seeing as impermanent as well, changing always" (2016, 123, my emphasis). This embracing of impermanence had been set in motion, both through the specific strategies in the scores, and through the iterative perspective that had been created by orienting toward the body archive. Contrary to the politics of naming that shape privileged archives, this method of naming offered vulnerable possibilities that could be inhabited with care and co-presence. Such a practice of naming with impermanence and proximity could be characterized by what Glissant has called the *trace*:

> "The trace is an opaque way of experiencing the branch and the wind: of being oneself, derived from the other. It is the truly disordered sand of utopia. Trace thought enables us to move away from the strangulations of the system. It thus refutes the extremes of possession. It cracks open the absolute of time. It opens onto these diffracted times that human communities today are multiplying among themselves, through conflicts and miracles. It is the violent wandering of the shared thought" (2020, 10).

In the following chapter, trace is explored in its most ephemeral form, through the subtle fleeting possibilities of the body and its gravitational pulls. Sitting with this shared wandering and the permeability of our gestures, I now turn to describing some of the key creative experiences that shaped the textural and ethical scope of *Apertures*— experiences that pointed toward how time and body might diffract through ambiguous and buoyant spaces of play.

Chapter 3

Play

As I expanded my inquiries into the expression and activation of the body archive, I found a renewed curiosity about the singular, unbridled qualities of the body, particularly those that are actively discarded or unwittingly omitted from the archives. My paths toward interdisciplinary practice with Mangal offered insights into the aspects of the body that were not, and perhaps could not be, known through the trace of forms and memories. This dimension of the body became clearer as I engaged with areas of my creative being in which I had relatively less training, and fewer habituated perceptions— especially voice and movement.

In this chapter, I discuss music that often arose within informal, open-ended spaces and moments, led by the body and its tender forays into a world that has a fleeting capacity to receive with compassion and care. In the first two chapters, I have pointed to the expectations and orientations we inherit, and the continuum of impressions we make on the world— now I turn to how we receive and transform— ourselves and those near us— and what new possibilities this transformation holds. Here, I consider what we open ourselves toward through apertures— to get to know this towardness in our diversely situated bodies, and how we can play with this sensation.

Play refers to the yet-untraced liminal spaces, within our bodies and in our dynamic frictions with other bodies, spaces, and temporalities. As apertures of unknowing and, at times, awkwardness, they offer levity, balance, and pleasure to the otherwise serious affective

atmospheres of artistic and scholarly pursuits. They also offer comfort in the way they allow us to breathe into the infinite particularities of our individual and relational experiences, revealing the hidden improvisatory awarenesses we often neglect to account for.

Having traversed geographical inundations and archival tectonics, I now shift to the realm of fire as an animating force— from the magma-like potentialities that precede form to the sparks that fly in moments of friction. I also explore what we assume to be destructive forces like failure and admixture, and examine the regenerative quality of certain detonations. This essay is a study in how, *through 'nothing,' we might arrive at something.*

the informal revolution

In 2019, I began to explore expressing myself through movement. The deep significance of this practice in my life is something I cannot fully do justice to in this chapter, but suffice it to say that inviting such intention and awareness into one's whole body in this way taught me profound lessons about what it means to listen with care to those around me and to understand the spatiality of vibration. Similar to my experience with singing— and, to a lesser extent, the piano— my reluctance to engage in movement practices came from a sense that I may not be taken seriously or that I would feel self-conscious, as I was not a trained dancer.[61]

I was first introduced into the practice of contact improvisation at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, during a two-week collaborative workshop/residency that brought together musician-composers, choreographers, and dancers.[62] Throughout the residency, choreographer-dancer Michael Schumacher guided us through various interactive movement

[61] As with my exploration of voice and piano in performance, it was Ganavya who helped me understand the urgency of having a creative and personal relationship with movement.
[62] The program was called *Creative Gesture: Collective Composition Lab*. Incidentally, this was the same residency where I was able to delve further into Pauline Oliveros' practice of Deep Listening, guided by cellist Anne Bourne.

exercises and an interdisciplinary practice known as *instant composition*, developed by the Amsterdam-based Instant Composers Pool.[63] Outside of this experience, at Harvard's Dance Center, I attended a few sessions of Gaga movement, a modality developed by the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin and oriented toward a wide spectrum of bodies and abilities. I would also come to spend a few sessions working with my friend, the scholar and interdisciplinary artist Anya Yermakova, who helped me understand some of the fundamentals of contact and movement-based improvisation.

These myriad collaborative, movement-centric sessions were not intended to be presented to an audience, and for this reason, perhaps, I was able to experience a latitude of aesthetic possibility and intimacy with my co-creators that was unprecedented. The immersive quality of these shared sessions would eventually draw me into a more playful approach in other parts of my creative practice. What comes to mind is the kinetic energy of what Fred Moten calls the *informal*, "The informal is not the absence of form. It's the thing that gives form" (Harney & Moten 2013, 129). As my musical practice has moved deeper into the perceptual multiplicity of form-as-archive, particularly in the realm of rhythm and temporality, it feels apt to address the infinite possibility from which form emerges, and in relation to which a composition of proximity may be understood.

commotion, consilience

One of the regular exercises that Schumacher led during the Banff workshop was a kind of warm-up of the senses, a way to open a more improvisational session — we would collectively walk through the room, tracing multiple circuitous routes, and gently expanding the awareness of our dynamic positionality in relation to others and to the surfaces of the room. As a playful and

[63] See Schuiling (2019) for further discussion of the historical context of the Instant Composers Pool in relation to European jazz and improvised music scenes.

collective tracing of possibility, it allowed the body to lead in shaping trajectories, and to be drawn toward specific people and objects. This exercise of walking with soft spatial awareness would then gradually expand to include nascent gestures and soundings. I am reminded of Renee Gladman's description of the blank space into which the gesture of writing launches itself:

> "I was saying that the blank space was already commotional when I turned to look at the line, which wasn't yet there but which was a vibratory presence in the room. And it wasn't just one line that I felt but every possible line, pressing at every possible opening in the field. The field was commotional: it did not allow stasis" (2016, 122).

In a similar way, attuning myself to the *commotional* nature of the space around me expanded the realm of possibilities for creating sound. During the workshop, I would come to play more with my body, voice, and piano, but various surfaces and materials in the room would also become sounding instruments or otherwise conduits for resonance— the walls, floors, windows, spare music stands, the pedals of the piano, the bodies of those moving around me. Over the two weeks, I found myself becoming more comfortable with expression from a place of not knowing, and this being a source of joy and curiosity rather than trepidation.

It shed new light on the perceptual uncertainties of intercultural music making with RAJAS, and helped pave a path toward understanding my embodied presence within contexts oriented around Western classical and new music. These and other experiences with movement and interdisciplinarity also gave me confidence in the pursuit of pleasure as a modality of subverting blueprints and archival stasis. More importantly, they brought a radical possibility of trust into my practice and an awareness of the tenuous and permeable spaces within one's own body and between bodies.

Exercising this trust and leaning into this newfound permeability enabled me to put together "Consilience," for which I engaged my body in a new physical stance.[64] At the time, I was at an

[64] I was commissioned by the Bang On A Can Marathon to write this new piece for myself, which was performed as part of the live streamed festival in August 2020.

artist residency in rural Oregon, surrounded by mountains and working in a beautifully resonant space with vaulted ceilings and a piano.[65] Drawn in by this acoustic space and embracing the suspended, virtual temporality of the pandemic, I felt a curiosity open up toward otherwise possibilities for this solo commission. I set up a chair and piano bench such that I could rest the mrudangam in front of me while having access to the piano. I experimented with ways to arrange my hands to be able to play both instruments, simultaneously finding spaces to sing.

The piece unfolded in fragments, as I improvised various textures at the interstices of these instruments— independently familiar to me, and yet sparking uncanny resonances when brought together in this way. It felt as though the piece was emerging from the hidden conversations among various parts of my body, which were finding their way toward new gestural resonances and alignments. The creative process became oriented toward listening to these embodied conversations. "Consilience" is a word that sociobiologist E. O. Wilson used to describe the confluence— etymologically speaking, the 'jumping together' — of multiple streams of knowledge. 'Consilience' was certainly an apt word to describe the leap of faith that made this new instrumental setup possible (1998).

Creating this piece also involved accepting that I was playing an aggregate 'instrument' with which I only had a few weeks of experience. With barely enough time to internalize these new gestures and embodied flows, I memorized the piece for the premiere performance. The 'score' was submerged in my body-memory, and in performance, I was focused on being able to ride the waves of these emergent movement pathways. The visual score for the piece was put together after the fact for the commissioning party— it primarily served as an outline, reflecting the contours and pathways as I had internalized them, and as they had evolved in the premiere

[65] The artist residency was an experiment in new formations of creative community and exchange, led by Esperanza Spalding, with support from Sanam Petri and Viktor Ewing-Givens.

performance. I used Western notation across all of the instrumental parts; *sargam* (Indian solfège) with shifting tonic pitches was incorporated for some vocal parts, and text and graphics helped to convey some mrudangam parts.

haptic continuities

A couple of months before I created "Consilience," I had written a piece for solo percussion, which served as a precursor to my own solo exploration. The piece, titled "Haptic," involved a meditation on the timbral and embodied resonances of three instruments, articulated by a single performer.[66] The percussionist, Evan Daniel Saddler, was interested in having me write a piece that included the frame drum, and what emerged was a piece that involved ricochets and complementary movements among frame drum, vibraphone, and suspended cymbal. The process of exploring novel performance positions and the resultant creative patterns that emerged became a study in simultaneity that came to inform "Consilience."

The title, "Haptic," refers to perception through the sense of *touch*, and was largely inspired by the expanded spatial and surface-oriented awareness that I found through movement practices. The piece opens with an improvisation where the performer is invited to touch and create subtle sounds with the various instrument surfaces near them, simultaneously sketching movement pathways through the surrounding space. There is a balance among playing with the hand, mallet, and bow, allowing the particularities of each vibrating surface to punctuate each immersive episode.

The resonances that allowed my imagination to move from exploring surfaces vicariously in "Haptic" to engaging in my own surface-driven improvisations in "Consilience" encouraged me to consider the speculative continuities across embodied knowledges in my evolving practice of

[66] "Haptic" was written for percussionist Evan Daniel Saddler as part of an initiative by the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music to support freelance performers during the onset of the pandemic.

composing for Western classical and new music contexts. This haptic approach was further necessitated by a need to become familiar with the techniques of instruments I had not written so specifically for before. It invited balance into the notational apertures I describe in Chapter 2, and oriented my inquiry toward an imagined 'common denominator' between my artistic curiosities and the ways that Western classically trained performers navigate their own dominant blueprints.

Perhaps adding another dimension to the *composition of proximity* discussed in the previous chapter, this new haptic awareness allowed composition to become a vessel for imagined proximity. Each piece I wrote for this context — a few solo and duo pieces, and two string quartets — became a distinct study in textural specificity and ethical orientation, but also an intimate window into a particular nexus of body, memory, and instrument, as experienced from afar, or at least well before the co-presence of performance. These experiences brought new sensibilities into my writing for RAJAS, as I began to explore how the generally interchangeable and layered parts could be interspersed with desires for certain timbral resonances.

Centering these embodied continuities through the specificity of surfaces helped to overcome feelings of inadequacy about being a 'Western classical' composer, inviting me to rethink the distinction between *blueprints* and *apertures* as they manifested in the body. I found myself tracing a similar path as I had explored in my Karnatik vocal lessons with T. M. Krishna— excavating the otherwise embodied possibilities that dwell beneath the sedimentation of a privileged and imposing archive. *How might I articulate the otherwise possibilities of Western art music that had flowed within my reach?* Such modes of inquiry enabled me to conceive of the solo violin piece for Jennifer Koh, titled "Kindling," in which I found ways to study and relate to

J.S. Bach's violin partita no. 2 in D minor.[67] Such questions also drew my curiosity toward reapproaching the quintessential Karnatik texture of voice, violin, and mrudangam in "illuminance: scattered truths"— albeit transformed through a new set of possibilities, as I sang and played mrudangam along with violinist Lucia Lin.[68]

I recall Saba Mahmood's challenge to neoliberal feminist notions of agency and emancipation, in which she points to the profound potential for the body to unravel simplistic binaries of hegemony and resistance, oppression and freedom (2001). To illustrate the complex notions of agency at play in the women's mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood invokes the example of a virtuoso pianist, who "submits herself to the, at times painful, regime of disciplinary practice, as well as hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability— the requisite agency — to play the instrument with mastery" (2001, 210). This resulting agency may variously be brandished through gestures of belonging or gestures toward the otherwise— the common thread is in the body's malleability and openness. As Mahmood puts it: "Rebellion and compliance both devolve on the docility of the body" (2001, 216). This is not to obliterate the distinction between these divergent ethical trajectories, but rather to point to their entanglements in the realm of embodiment.

After all, the body is the common denominator that carries both the impact of blueprints and the expansions of apertures. In many ways, movement improvisation and the subsequent study of embodied possibilities on unfamiliar instruments introduced me to the resilient and prescient surfaces of the body, as they listen and respond to their surroundings, even without conscious training. It also led me to investigate the nuances of the body as a site of ethical transformation.

[67] This solo violin piece was commissioned for violinist Jennifer Koh's "Alone Together" series, which involved Koh live streaming premieres of short solo pieces from her home in New York City, every week between April and June, 2020.
[68] This duo piece was premiered as part of Lin's *In Tandem* series in April 2021.

Similar to the momentum that came from loosening the hold of Karnatik mrudangam rudiments, engaging with these nascent intuitive practices prompted me to consider the body's informal domains, mobilized by what Moten calls "a practice of (anti- and antemasterful) planning, given in a practice of dancing" (2017, 275). Indeed, as I illustrate below, these domains put the very concept of mastery in stark perspective.

gathering and holding

In the first two chapters, I offered some preliminary ruminations on how Mangal could be a 'common' gathering space, and how the archive — through a score like "Origins" — could draw attention to the patterns and conditions of gathering so as to fine-tune the notion of a democratic gesture. Now, it feels apt to turn to the body's own potential to create impressions that undercut the specifics of formal articulation. Recognizing this potential paves the way toward circumventing the primacy of form as the currency of aesthetic exchange and ethical transformation, and listening to the *shadow musicality* of the body-in-process.

As Judith Butler (2015) offers:

> "How, then, do we think about these transient and critical gatherings? One important argument that follows is that *it matters that bodies assemble*, and that the political meanings enacted by demonstrations are not only those that are enacted by discourse, whether written or vocalized. Embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive. In other words, forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make. Silent gatherings, including vigils or funerals, *often signify in excess of any particular written or vocalized account of what they are about*" (2015, 7-8, my emphasis).

What are the aspects of my travel through various creative contexts that can signify on their own, even without my conscious formal intervention? To go a bit deeper, what new relational possibilities are opened up by this reservoir of signification, especially as I venture vulnerably from spaces of unknowing?

In a similar vein to Butler, Tavia Nyong'o has pointed to the struggle between mundane (*chronos*) and precarious (*kairòs*) temporalities, and the further risk of questions of destiny (*telos*) getting in the way of the dynamic presence and possibility created in the 'occupied' time of revolution (2012).[69] As I orient myself toward new and precarious creative paths in relation to the unknown, I wonder about the intensities and attunements that come with 'occupying' certain liminal or transformative temporalities. How does the body, in these moments of channeling, become permeable to forces that subsume notions of individual agency?

Finally, beyond the questions of the *who* and *when*, and the spatiotemporal politics of these embodied convergences, it feels urgent to consider body posture and visceral openness to new movements. *Before we allow ourselves to be held and to move in gentler ways— in what ways are we holding our own bodies?*

I draw here on Danielle Goldman's discussion of the resonances and tensions between the embodied practice of contact improvisation and the requisite training to put one's body *on the line* in contexts of activism and protest (2007). Bridging the ethical chasm between the risks taken in the dance studio and those taken by civil rights activists, Goldman highlights "the strategic use of slack musculature and stillness" through falling and 'going limp' (2007, 63). There is certainly some complexity that arises in what Goldman underscores as the ambiguous line between agentic stillness and stereotypical passivity, which has asymmetric racialized and gendered ramifications. While keeping this in view, there is yet something to learn from the intentional flexibility of the body to move in a wider latitude of direction— as a modality of necessary protection and hopeful vulnerability.

[69] Nyong'o specifically illustrates the precarious temporalities of Occupy London, of bodies gathering to protest capitalist exploitation, drawing on Antonio Negri's theorization of multitudes and temporality of revolution (2012).

This wider latitude doesn't seek a countermasterful versatility but rather follows in the path of what Julietta Singh calls *vulnerable reading*, a practice that can "move us 'beyond' mastery, not in the sense of exceeding it but in the sense of *surviving* it in order to envision being otherwise in and for the world" (2018b, 23, original emphasis)**.** Such a practice of vulnerability attunes itself to the fleeting possibilities, and to what José Muñoz described as queer futurity, in which "the gesture and its aftermath, the ephemeral trace, matter more than many traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics" (2009, 81).

I imagine my compositional forays into Western classical music spaces as emerging from this kind of vulnerable attunement, a search for otherwise resonances and modes of relation amidst dominant discursive constellations. In other words, rather than seeking validation as a composer, my embodied presence in these contexts is driven by sketching alternative modes of perception and interaction. After all, this is an ethical orientation that is highlighted in contact improvisation and in Gaga movement: shifting focus from external form — including what Moten and Harney might call a *professionalized* role according to an institution — and toward internal flows and possibilities as they are felt by the body (2013).

Although Goldman characterizes contact improvisation as a training, I am actually curious about the ways the practice draws out the 'untrained' and 'uncontrolled' parts of the body as they come into contact with new surfaces and vibrations. Even such a formulation feels imprecise, because our bodies are engaged in a continuous, improvised pedagogy as they move through dynamic spaces and temporalities. Perhaps we can reframe this informal domain as the *hidden virtuosities* of the body— Adam Overton has described this the "common, virtuosic body," offering that a certain stillness can move us out of habituated perceptual paths and open the "door to a performance that is already underway" (2006, 176).

This notion of common virtuosity feels like an apt description for the process of putting together "Consilience," the moments of collective singing I work into my music,[70] and my discoveries through movement practices. It also offers an otherwise pathway in relation to Stefan Sunandan Honisch's critical argument that "virtuosity, ability, and disability are interlocking corporeal performances" (2019, 278). It is through an intentional recognition of hidden, common virtuosities that my practice of a *composition of proximity* is rendered ethically possible. In the following section, I delve into the pleasure that is inherent in recognizing these virtuosities—within our body and in relation to other bodies.

surface tensions

Under what conditions are we actually able to find pleasure in the virtuosities of the body? Musical virtuosity is so often set in motion through the various affective trajectories of expectation, aspiration, discipline, and preservation, that it feels at odds with the possibility of pleasure. In my experience, there is certainly a joy in overcoming a challenge, and to reaching a new level of fluency, but somehow it requires the liminality of a ludic, ungoverned space to find what Jacques Attali poignantly describes as "a labor on sounds, without a grammar, without a directing thought, a pretext for festival, in search of thoughts," a practice wherein "rhythms and sounds are the supreme mode of relation between bodies once the screens of the symbolic, usage and exchange are shattered," one that neither marks nor produces the body, but allows for "taking pleasure in it" (1985, 143).

Attali is essentially describing the backgrounding of form and idiom, and I would connect this to what Turner calls the state of *communitas*, where the undulations of improvised

[70] Listening suggestion: "One" from *Apertures*.

co-presence take the helm. Whether such apertures toward pleasure and co-presence arise in a manner that is independent of formal parameters or not, the linking of pleasure and virtuosity leads me to wonder about the ways that notions of embodied synchrony and entropy have garnered divergent ethical associations. A pattern that emerges in studies of music cognition is to posit synchrony as the most desirable outcome, as the key to social bonding through sound. For instance, Mari Riess Jones speaks of the forces of attraction between internal and external temporalities in the perceptual process. The 'rhythms' she discusses here are those of neural oscillators, but they have profound implications for our rhythmic orientations in music:

> "In most listening situations, the state of dyadic synchrony between a driving and driven rhythm has a strong appeal, so strong that certain states of synchrony are termed *attractors*. Simply put, we are wired to draw toward synchrony as a moth is drawn to light" (2019, 2).

In my creative process, I often find myself wondering: what would it mean to *queer* this neural attraction? Throughout my experience in Karnatik music communities, it was the overtly synchronized and choreographed moments— predominantly in the final cadences of a rhythmic improvisation— that would break the meditative and playful flow for me, both as a listener and improviser. These particular gestures of forced synchrony felt ethically distinct from spontaneous and flowing modes of synchrony— they seemed synonymous with the nationalist blueprints of the 'classical,' with toxic forms of masculinity in Karnatik music, and with the enclosure of an improvisation. Similar questions about the ethical undercurrent of synchrony would crop up as I found my way into the creative music community.

Trying to understand my queer relationship to synchrony, I wondered if the pleasure of synchronized musical action emerged in dialogue with, the friction of not being quite together. As Adam Overton puts it, "It is this improvisatory negotiation between internal and external forces where we first locate the body's virtuosic dance" (2006, 174). After all, I was drawn to

polyrhythmic musical practices, which involve a being-together through not-being-together in unison— a togetherness found in perceptual counterpoint. Such a musical methodology creates a unique ethical canvas for navigating what happens when we tilt, individually or collectively, in any direction.

I am drawn to Sara Ahmed's description of the *queer pleasure* of gathering in ways from which we have been barred—

> "… pleasure involves an opening towards others; pleasure orientates bodies towards other bodies in a way that impresses on the surface, and creates *surface tensions*. Pleasures are about the contact between bodies that are already shaped by past histories of contact. Some forms of contact don't have the same effects as others… When bodies touch and give pleasure to bodies that have been barred from contact, then those bodies are reshaped… The hope of queer politics is that bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others" (2014, 165, my emphasis).

I found Ahmed's 'surface impressions' useful in thinking through the Score and the body archive, and here, *surface tensions* help illustrate the emergent frictions in co-creation, especially in what Jason Stanyek has called the 'intercorporeal' dimension of intercultural music making (2004). Surface tensions also manifest in the sensation of sonic and cultural worlds colliding and shifting within the body, and in the improvisational drift that stretches any ideal notion of form. These fertile frictions create mysterious gravitational pulls in our bodies as co-creators, and invite a focused relational listening.

Surface tensions— both border affect and sonic multiplicity — seem to defy normative logics of music analysis and notation: *how does one transcribe the interstitial process of rhythmic alignment?* Often, the gap resists the archival paradigm of proof and measurement altogether— it is an ephemeral, haptic negotiation. It was in thinking through my relationship to music analysis— a practice befuddled by intercultural and interdisciplinary practices— that I took an interest in understanding these navigational nuances and their ethical orientations.

I found momentum in conceptualizing this friction as *temporal uncertainty*— the uncanny process by which a musician or ensemble works through differences in timing and rhythmic relation— from minute deviations and intentional lilts to chaotic derailments. Rather than emphasizing the narrative of conflict resolution and synchrony, I wonder what these apertures teach us about coexisting and listening with care. Through such moments, we get to experiment with the embodied flexibility of formal parameters and to test the ethical limits of entropy.

entropy and grit

Like synchrony, entropy also has its ethical particularities. For instance, musicologist Susan McClary (1989) and composer George Rochberg (2004) both critique— from their respective vantage points— a certain tendency among twentieth century avant-garde/modernist composers to valorize the creation of 'difficult' music. To McClary, this trend signified a 'terminal prestige,' a cloistered aesthetic value system that, in its anxiety to ensure its own survival, fell deeply out of touch, no longer caring whether it reached the bodies of listeners. For Rochberg, the composer, the trend toward difficult music signalled a fundamental need to return to the clarity and coherence of tonality, and to holistic modes of social and ecological resonance, where humanity was inseparable from nature (2004).

As Rochberg put it, "To play with entropy in art is to play with a self-consuming fire" (2004, 238). Certainly, there is much to say about the embodied traction in musical directionality that offers comfort and familiar vessels for feeling, particularly in contrast with music that is intended to be difficult to understand. After all, Rochberg himself came to abandon serialism after a personal tragedy, and found a need to create music that helped him *feel*. However, what if music's ability to make us feel was not tied to inherent order or 'tried and true' structures, but rather its potential to catalyze care and embodied co-presence? For me, this is the idea of

pleasure without grammar or pretext (Attali 1985), and the generative potential of opacity (Glissant 1997), as they draw us away from notions of intelligibility and toward otherwise modalities of collective relation.

Similar to their composer counterparts, musicologists have also been known to privilege notions of the 'difficult' and the 'serious' over the dimensions of musical practice that invite play, feeling, and pleasure. As William Cheng has argued, the reluctance to embrace feminist and queer perspectives in musicology was largely "because they aired out what had been known all along—that music is sensual, sexual, social; that it comforts, disrupts, coerces" — essentially, that it has an impact on the body (2013, 841-842). The pleasure in surface tensions and the haptic nature of navigating temporal uncertainty points to the power of resonance and embodied relation over formal directionality, while acknowledging that they often move in tandem. Entropy can emerge through intentional formal parameters, and it can also soothe us in the way it unravels and rebuilds form. Rochberg's 'self-consuming fire' holds the potential for new movements and feelings.

In my creative practice, degrees of formal training and directionality exist within a curiously inverse matrix with trajectories of pleasure and feeling. I find movement and singing to involve a kind of vulnerability and honesty in their uncertain meandering that are relatively more difficult to find in my approaches to piano and mrudangam, which were shaped by a trained directional awareness. More often than not, musicians are conditioned to move in specific directions through improvisation, especially doing whatever it takes to get back 'on course,' to be in time with the rest of the ensemble. Even a seemingly experimental and unpredictable practice like contact improvisation is not immune to this directionality, as Goldman highlights in the desire for graceful performance to override the inevitable tensions between bodies— what she calls the

"often ignored, but crucial, grit of contact improvisation" (2007, 70). It is likely that the less professional training we have, the more open we are to the pleasure of this grit.

This grit is what I have come to value in my work with RAJAS, and what I have attempted to make more space for, even as I write with greater degrees of specificity. Though certain musical practices enable the entropic listening and grit to come to the forefront, temporal uncertainty as a musical phenomenon is virtually ubiquitous across different kinds of ensembles— after all, no two articulations of melody or pulse are identical, and any note could be an anchor for the co-creating body to know itself in relation to other soundings. There is a lot to be gleaned from listening to how we variously handle this inevitable phenomenon across musical contexts, how we enforce certain kinds of course correction, and alternatively, the deviations we allow to slip through. These gestures of alignment form a shadow musicality of their own, drawing us toward an embodied awareness. Instead of tolerating or managing these deviations, can we allow them to become kinetic and generative practices of drift?

In 2020, I composed two string quartets— *Borne* (for Del Sol Quartet) and *Surface Tensions* (for JACK Quartet).[71] Both of these pieces were inspired by piano improvisations that I had recorded while at two different residencies— in Banff, AB in 2019 and in rural Oregon in 2020. Though a lot of my compositional work exists in deep dialogue with improvisational creative processes, there was something in these improvisations— which were not originally intended or imagined for string quartet— that seemed to invite this kind of perception and orchestration. In both cases, the improvisations involved a meditative unfolding of a harmonic drone/ostinato as it spiraled outward, precipitating not only variations in contour, but also radical and abrupt shifts in color, texture, and rhythm. I transcribed substantial sections and phrases, at some points placing

[71] *Borne* was created under the aegis of the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music. *Surface Tensions* was commissioned by the 2020 National Sawdust New Works Commission.

them in layered counterpoint or altering their rhythmic feel, gradually building up the piece from this singular point of departure.

My goal was not to represent the improvisation authentically, but rather to use its temporal textures to invite another set of bodies to navigate these embodied nuances together. Both compositions, reflecting the improvisations from which they were born, invite delicate rhythmic alignments and vulnerable attunements among the musicians in the string quartet, with certain moments being designed to heighten ensemblic ambiguities and relational awareness. This writing process essentially involved excavating an archive (informal recordings of improvisations) of my own temporal impressions and transcribing them for their ability to produce friction, rather than as an ideal form or structure. It also entailed a new dimension of play, an intentional orientation of specificity, complexity, and proximity toward their ability to create sounds of alignment and intercorporeal grit.

virtuosity and nuance

These frictions and negotiations, despite their hedonic potential, do not always result in a beautiful or optimistic experience of intimacy and coexistence. I certainly don't intend to idealize these spaces of conflict within a totalizing gesture. Temporal uncertainty or drift is also present in what Jack Halberstam might call the *queer failure* to inhabit time and form in normative ways (2011). This failure has ethical consequences— most often, it invites 'correction,' or the abrupt re-establishment of ideal or dominant flows. These negotiations can sound out power dynamics, alerting us to how differently situated bodies are habituated to take up space and control directionality. They also reveal a kind of perceptual stubbornness— the racialized and gendered ways we cling to and assert our temporality and placement of sound.

I am drawn to the way that José Muñoz describes the hopeful possibilities and *queer virtuosity* that emerge at such moments of uncertainty and failure— as he puts it:

> "Queer utopia is not just a failure to achieve normative virtuosity; it is also a virtuosity that is born in the face of failure within straight time's measure" (2009, 177-178).

In my understanding and use of the terms, *queer utopia* and *queer virtuosity* are ethically distinct from what Singh has called countermastery, as they do not necessarily seek permanence and power. Rather than constituting a virtuosity *of* queerness, the interstices, the otherwise, they seek survival in a world that is measured by various modes of temporal and perceptual mastery.

I wonder about the ways that experiences of temporal drift shape my solo expeditions as an improviser-composer, particularly in light of my failure to inhabit the individuated notions of virtuosity. It has been a perennial struggle for me to 'solo' as an improviser — both in Karnatik music contexts and in the myriad ways that word is used in creative music streams. In my queer failure of this soloistic orientation, I tend to falter— it takes shape as an audible resistance within my body. This, too, is a surface tension— the friction between expectation and actuality — albeit one that is shaped by the pedagogy of discomfort, rather than pleasure.

Perhaps, for this reason, I rarely compose 'solo' moments for myself, where the mrudangam is the spotlighted improvising force. However, I do encounter calls to be a soloist in musical contexts curated by others. I haven't yet figured out how to refuse, though a politics of refusal likely plays out in the nuances of such 'solo' moments. *How fine is the line between refusal and failure?* In my music, I often aspire to move as an undercurrent, making my path felt through the activation of movement among other surfaces. When I compose 'solo' moments or roles for others, I have been drawn toward creating shared spaces or introducing elements of contention. It is in this spirit that I composed a distributed 'soloist' role for *The Illusion of Permanence*, one that is shared among my mrudangam and piano playing and the voluntary vocalists. As I describe

it in the performance notes, the soloists manifest "both as an individual and a collective force," serving to "orient the ensemble from within the texture."

The solo act, of course, never truly exists in solitude, and varies along a spectrum of ethical intentions. Solo gestures and sounds are made in exchange with particular social spaces. Are they conjured within a relatively antagonistic atmosphere, where one is judged or made to prove oneself capable or worthy? Or do they emerge as a stream of testimony within a ritual of collective ecstasy and catharsis, an affirmation of belonging? Most often, in performance, it is shaped along a spectrum of ethical call and response, a balancing of co-creative desires.

As I set out to understand what emerges in the liminal spaces within and among bodies, I am drawn to ask: *in a world that is shaped by rubrics of mastery, how can a soloist set forth the terms for acts of vulnerable listening?* Vulnerable listening resists modes of spectacle, extraction, and disembodiment— it is a listening to the space between us, as it expands, permeates, and transforms our categories of perception. Moten poignantly offers that "the distinction between entanglement and virtuosity is improvised in virtuous, communal, maternal attention to detail" (2017, 277).

In sketching this careful, improvised space between situatedness and flight, Moten pauses to consider the word *movement*, reflecting on its usage both in the Civil Rights Movement and in the Movement for Black Lives, and the ways these gender-inflected struggles are articulated through the ethics and aesthetics of creative music.

> "Our mother's movement, in its radical dispersal, in its ongoing and decentralized largesse of *charismata* (as Erica Edwards and Cedric Robinson and Danielle Goldman teach us), was a movement of contact (improvisation)'s small differences, its hand-to-hand rituals of study, its constant practice of the haptical poetics of entanglement that turn out to have been simultaneously the object and the method of— or deeper still the *party* for— self-defense" (2017, 277, original emphasis).

In my creative practice, attention to detail and haptic entanglement have been magnified through the potency of voice and movement, which have served as apertures of intimacy and honesty, reflexively and in relation. Vocalist-instrumentalist-scholar Ganavya Doraiswamy—who has been an encouraging and collaborative guide in these creative forays— often asks, rhetorically, in our conversations: *what is the purpose of studying nuance if you can't practice it in your life?*[72]

Indeed, this is the ultimate lesson of these meditations on the uncertainty and particularity of embodiment, directing deeper scrutiny toward our lofty ideas of art music and their codependency with academic worlds, all upheld on the cornerstones of 'sophistication,' and 'nuance.' In our professional aspirations to survive these mastery-ridden spaces, are we able to compassionately navigate the wayward nuances and desires of those who make up what Moten and Harney call the *undercommons* (2013)? How can we approach these entropic intersections with *care*, and without erasing or neutralizing the queer details?

William Cheng has asked a similar question, drawing attention to the professional limits of care in both art music and academic spaces:

> "If the idea of art for art's sake is dead, our autopsy would show that it perished not simply from unrealistic ideals, ontological falsity, and hero worship, but also from its moral untenability. To my ears, *aesthetic autonomy* brings echoes of *academic freedom*. It's not that they're synonymous, but that recommendations of *Let music be music* bear injunctive similarities to *Let scholars be scholars*, the belief that academics have a right to pursue their work free from political pressures and without fear of termination. Such freedom can nurture creative thought. *But how can one ethically claim such extreme immunities without also attending to others' extreme vulnerabilities?* (Cheng 2016, 48-49, original emphasis).

[72] Ganavya's essay, "Shards of Ether," is a remarkable, nonlinear treatise on the intimate and nuanced entanglements of music, study, and life (Doraiswamy 2021).

What such insights bring into view for me is the depth of our perceptual choices and their ethical consequences— the ways we embark on our entangled solo trajectories and attend to the proliferation of otherwise possibilities *matter*.

lost and found

It is through attention to embodied nuance and ways of treating it with care that I have found a modality of surviving at the interstices of myriad blueprints and notions of virtuosity. Throughout this dissertation, I have described desires for irreverence, curiosities about relational tension, and orientations toward subverting permanence. At many points along these nonlinear creative paths, I have felt lost, disoriented, and uncertain about my next steps, particularly as I parted ways with elements of my practice and aspirational trajectories that had sustained me for long periods of time. Yet, I made an effort to proceed with the trust and hope in what Jack Halberstam calls the "utility of getting lost over finding our way" (2011, 15).

My discussions of apertures and of the revolutionary force of uncertainty are informed by these meandering experimentations with the values I embody through my practice. As I arrive at some sense of closure with this *writing-in-time*, I offer a few threads and questions here, which I imagine will continue to resonate and find anchors of possibility in the days to come.

Throughout this writing, I have asked many questions of the space into which we launch ourselves, the blueprints, the apertures in the Score, and the vulnerable tracings of alignment in relation to other bodies. In essence, I have been asking how we can sort through our entanglements with the 'negative space' that surrounds us, the surfaces off of which our vibrational impressions rebound. Negative space is not just the space we don't take up, the

seemingly 'blank' space onto which we mark our gestural presence. It embodies the dynamics of becoming through an intimate dialogue with our surroundings.

Finding that the term *negative space* "slanders the palimpsestic reservoir," Moten offers the alternative notion of *affirmative space*— "a holding in and against the hold, a for(e)given(n)ess: *ab*solution in amniosis" (2017, 255). In my experience, the creative music community was the first of multiple amniotic spaces that held me in ways that allowed me to find my own nuance and connection with others. The flexible perception of form— mobilized in African diasporic practices of polyrhythm and in other aesthetic practices of *lilt*[73]— undergirds the ability to be in two places, seemingly at once, to experiment with perception and embodied permeability in radical ways. This lilt is the ability to *feel*— through the nuanced contours and uncertainties of embodied relation— where a person might be, in which direction they are moving, and how to support and align with this movement.

Ingrid Monson has described the process of inhabiting such spaces of multiplicity in African diasporic music as involving *perceptual agency*— "the conscious focusing of sensory attention that can yield differing experiences of the same event" (2008, S37). She then expands this formal multiplicity into the broader ethical question of "what people choose to do with musical sounds given the sensory inputs, the manifold cognitive processing possibilities of the brain, and the sociocultural contexts in which they listen and perform" (S52). Understanding these perceptual choices and the ways they shape worlds and ethical possibility leads me to think in terms of what I call *perceptual improvisation*— encompassing the many nodes and layers of perceptual transformation that happen in real-time and the playful, unbridled moments of queer virtuosity that serve as apertures toward new or unexpected patterns and relationships.

[73] Ashon Crawley describes it as "Black music and its tendency to lilt, to be in and off rhythm… the arrhythmia, the polyrhythmia, of blackness" (2017, 53).

Perceptual improvisation, like the fleeting queer possibilities and commotional spaces that inspire its naming, describes a perceptual orientation that is always in motion and impermanent. It permeates all kinds of interstitial practice — interpersonal, intercultural, and interdisciplinary — and is mobilized by an ethic of uncertainty. Perceptual improvisation is an attunement to the rhythm as a driving force of relation and blurring— Ashon Crawley poignantly describes this improvisational movement in the ethics of resisting notions of *center* (of pulse, being) altogether:

> "Rhythm is centripetal force— hovering overhead, in ears, vibrating within flesh— pulling toward its sonic, resonant center, but while it pulls others in, rhythm must act as its antithesis, centrifugally sending out signal from its varied centers. Centrifugitivity is the enactment of centripetal and centrifugal force spontaneously, simultaneously. But importantly, centrifugitivity is against the notion of centering" (2016, 106).

What we choose to do with perceptual impressions and possibilities— how we choose to find momentum to continually move away from the center, never settling for stasis and permanence — impacts the possibilities that may be set in motion for those around us.

Through the expansive perceptual possibilities of creative music, and with guidance from dear friends, I found my way into other amniotic spaces, and practices that I never imagined myself inhabiting— working with text and graphic scores, singing with others, dancing and other movement practices. Figuring these interdisciplinary perceptual modalities into my practice involved compassionately destabilizing my sense (and mastery) of self, and connecting with a more fundamental impermanence and fluidity. They involved taking a hard look at the chasm between my musical claims and the ongoing struggle to be honest amidst contextual parameters that are within reach and those that are assumed to be conducive to survival.

My emerging hope for my music— and the queer virtuosity I aspire toward— is to recognize and treat these parameters with impermanence, as points of reference from which to intently seek apertures, while remaining aware of my entanglemens with the archive. This sense of hope, and

the blurrings of Self and Other that accompany it, have come to reorient my attachments to the mrudangam, to particular formal comfort zones, and even to sound as a medium of practice. Having traced this vivid ethical and perceptual journey here, I find myself keenly aware of the affirmative spaces that I will curate and contribute to going forward, and the ways that these hopes and lessons will remain alive in my ongoing practice of questioning. I can only imagine what humbling transformations might lie ahead.

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List of Supplementary Materials

1. Scores

    a. Mangal score-in-progress samples (2018-2019)

        i. “Origins”
        ii. “Eventual”
        iii. “Gathering”
        iv. “Charcoal II”
        v. “Kaleidoscope + Waves”
        vi. “Swimming”
        vii. “Loopholes”
        viii. “Cradle”

    b. Miscellaneous commissioned scores (2020)

        i. “Borne”
        ii. “Kindling”
        iii. “Haptic”
        iv. “Consilience”
        v. “Surface Tensions”

    c. *The Illusion of Permanence* (2020)

    d. *Apertures*, for RAJAS (2021)

2. Audio/video recordings

    a. “Borne” — performed by Del Sol Quartet (video, June 2020)

    b. “Consilience” — performed by Rajna Swaminathan (video, August 2020)

    c. “Surface Tensions” — performed by JACK Quartet (video, December 2020)

    d. *Apertures* — performed by RAJAS (audio, January 2021)

3. Link to purchase/stream *Of Agency and Abstraction* (Biophilia Records, 2019): https://rajnaswaminathan.bandcamp.com/