Claiming A Voice: Speech, 'Voice', and Subjectivity in Early Asian American Independent Media

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Arthur Dong's 1990 documentary Claiming A Voice: The Visual Communications Story chronicles "the twenty-year history of the first arts group dedicated to productions by and about Asian Pacific Americans."[1] In it, the founding members of the oldest Asian American media arts organization in the United States discuss what was at stake at the time of its founding.[2] Duane Kubo situated the founding of VC within the context of the anti-war, civil rights, and other counter-cultural movements of the late 1960s. According to Kubo, the founders of VC were greatly influenced by the Third World Liberation Front, which was led by the Black Panthers at the time on UCLA's campus.[3] Linda Mabalot, long-time staff member and Executive Director of the organization for eighteen years, then articulated VC's founding mission:

> "Visual Communications was a part of this whole movement of seeing how we can utilize media as a form to 'empower our communities.' So in terms of the arts, that meant creating our own images that counter the stereotypical images that were in the media, that were really racist. Since the early days of silent films, the media has portrayed us as one-dimensional caricatures - whether they be cartoons for kids, or popular entertainment for mainstream America. VC's goal was to produce accurate and sensitive material about the Asian American experience and about our history."[4]

Despite its title, there was very little discussion of an Asian American 'voice' in the documentary. This 'voice' in question, and that which was claimed through the founding and continued existence of Asian American media arts centers such as VC and the production of Asian American independent media, is self-representation. Here, representation means media images and narratives: film, video, photography, print-based media such as cartoons and comics, as well as mass-distributed texts including novels, plays, newspapers, advertisement, and other forms. Mabalot's opening statement in Claiming A Voice highlights visuality—in terms of stereotypes and caricatures—as central to the struggle for Asian American self-representation, and I argue this ocularcentrism also extends to the majority of Asian American media scholarship and cultural criticism. The voice that is claimed here is primarily seen, or at least, seen and heard.

On the other hand, Claiming A Voice is full of Asian American voices. The documentary is built around a series of interviews with VC's founders and staff, as well as the group of Asian American artists, writers, and musicians who were featured in or have collaborated with VC in their media productions. These interviews are shot in what is commonly called the 'talking heads' format, in which the subject directly addresses the camera (and by extension, the audience) in a synchronized audio-visual representation. This representational strategy accentuates the fact that we are seeing Asian Americans as themselves and listening to them speak in their own voices. Films made at and through VC are excerpted throughout the documentary, and collectively they speak through a larger representational 'voice' that is then put in dialogue with the voice interviews on VC's history in the documentary.[5] Eddie Wong, one of VC's founders and a filmmaker, made the connection between speaking, 'voice,' and representation particularly clear in the discussion of his film Wong Sinsaang (1971):

> "At the time, I had just finished reading the autobiography of Malcolm X, and I began to understanding a little bit more about what was discussed as 'colonial relations,' where people who are colonized relate to their parents in a very... Well, in a very stilted manner. They see them through the eyes of their oppressors. And in this case, with my father, I saw him as someone who was subservient most of his life, having to deal with these white customers, who would often be verbally abusive. And so I really saw the film as someone re-examining his relationship with his own father, and trying to explain this person with a whole other life, beyond the stereotype was a whole other life that most people would never see."[6]

Here the lack of a voice—Wong relating to his father in a stilted manner and his father's verbal abuse by white customers—is connected to his father's silence and hidden 'voice;' a subjectivity that Wong seeks to represent in the film. Other voices are also heard on Claiming A Voice's soundtrack, and these Asian American voices sing, recite poetry, recall oral history, talk story, swear, joke, laugh, and otherwise vocalize in a variety of accents and often more than one language.[7] In this sense, the 'voice' that is claimed in Claiming A Voice is multi-vocal and syncretic. In the following chapter, I argue that multi-vocality and syncretism are central to the 'voice' heard in Asian American independent media produced since the 1970s, and are key to discussions of Asian American identity and subjectivity. Yet, at the same time, I question whether our voices have to be translated, comprehensible, or even audible to articulate Asian American experiences. When it comes to the subjective experiences of memory, migration, exile, and trauma, the materiality of Asian American voices speak volume without uttering a single word.

Voice, 'Voice,' and Asian American Subjectivity

Sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne wrote that, "Voices are among the most personalized and most naturalized forms of subjective self-expression; speakers and auditors routinely treat them as the stuff of consciousness."[8] Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics examines both spoken language and its "deep structure" from the perspectives of structuralism and semiotics, while Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong both privilege a voice-centered, universal orality over writing in their respective theories of communication.[9] Philosophers, including Edmund Husserl and Don Ihde, have also emphasized voice and listening in their phenomenological investigation.[10] Interestingly, Jacques Derrida, in his critique of Husserl's model of phenomenology, is equally focused on the experience of listening to one's voice. Derrida's critique is centered on what he calls the "metaphysics of presence." Derrida argues that speaking—long considered to be a fundamental act of human subjective communication—is, in fact, an act of "pure auto-affection" that is built on a set of differences. He wrote:

> To speak to someone is doubtless to hear oneself speak, to be heard by oneself; but, at the same time, if one is heard by another, to speak is to make him repeat immediately in himself the hearing-oneself-speak in the very form in which I effectuated it. This immediate repetition is a reproduction of pure auto-affection without the help of anything external."[11]

For Derrida, this auto-affection, enabled by hearing one's own voice while speaking, is also fundamental to any assertions of subjecthood: "This auto-affection is no doubt the possibility for what is called subjectivity or the for-itself, but, without it, no world as such would appear."[12]

Within cinema and media studies, the voice have been a specialized area of study, although, as French film sound theorist Michel Chion asserted: "there are voices, and then everything else," the human voice speaking dialogue is likely the most important sound heard in the majority of commercially released films.[13] Chion, in his book The Voice in Cinema, traced the origins of what he considers the most uniquely cinematic voice: the acousmêtre, a disembodied vocal subject, back to the primal experience of the infant hearing its mother's voice while still in the "uterine darkness" of her womb.[14] Feminist film scholar Kaja Silverman has critiqued Chion's dystopic origins myth of the powerful and malevolent acousmêtre as a patriarchal fantasy exhibiting a fear of entrapment that is symptomatic of "an ambivalence that attests to the divided nature of subjectivity."[15] Indeed, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis have played a pivotal role in the theorizing of voice in cinema, especially in the work of feminist film theorists including Silverman, Mary Ann Doane, Amy Lawrence, and others.[16] A parallel body of scholarship centering on female vocality in music also developed around this time. Pioneered by feminist musicologists, these studies of female voice and subjectivity in diverse musical forms ranging from opera to the blues soon expanded into the examination of other forms, including Shakespearean plays and classical mythology, as well as joining with the aforementioned work in feminist film theory, marking the 1990s and early 2000s as an important time in the interdisciplinary scholarship on voice among U.S. feminists.[17] These theories and criticisms, centered on female voices and built around psychoanalysis's emphasis on the subconscious, drives, fantasies, and trauma, have informed our understanding of the complexities and contradictions in the process of subject formation.

As the title of the Visual Communications documentary demonstrates, the symbolism of the 'voice' and its accompanying discourse are also key to discussions of race and subjectivity.[18]

The slogans and speeches from racial civil rights movements are peppered with terms such as "breaking the silence" and "reclaiming our voices." Postcolonial discourses highlight the unlearning of the colonizer's imposed language and cultural values, accompanied by the rediscovery and cultivation of one's own "mother tongue." Liberationist writing, poetry, and songs are often collected in volumes titled "The Voice of…" It is also a common moniker for activist media projects, including radio and documentaries, which seek to represent a marginalized community or speak from a minoritarian perspective. "In The Beginning" is program of short films produced by a group of first-generation Asian American independent filmmakers that represent both these intents.[19] In the following sections, I focus on selected works from this program and explore their use of 'voice' and voice in relation to their Asian American identity and subjecthood. The short films included in "In The Beginning" are all produced by the students and graduates of Ethno-Communications. Ethno-Communications was a film production program founded at UCLA in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Asian, Chicano, Native American, and African American students who were influenced by the social protest movements and counter culture of the time. Its ethos was influenced by Third Cinema and other liberationist media movements, and especially by the films and writing of Latin American filmmakers including Glauber Rocha, Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino, and Julio Garcia Espinosa.[20] While it is debatable whether Ethno-Communications produced the first generation of Asian American independent filmmakers, it is nonetheless clear in viewing this collection of films that the student filmmakers in Ethno-Communications made conscious efforts to reflect upon and actively engage with the Asian American Movement in their films.[21] These films also reflect the "anti-slick" stance of the students, in their form, budget, and content, as well as in their rejection of the values and standards of the dominant media industries of

Hollywood and network television.[22] Therefore, in the context of this discussion, I argue that they represent one of the earliest "claimings" of the Asian American 'voice.'

Eddie Wong, one of the Ethno-Communications graduates who founded VC, articulated the political stance of the program in his discussion of Wong Sinsaang.[23] Wong Sinsaang is a filmic portrait of Franklin Wong, the filmmaker's father, who operated a dry-cleaning and laundry shop in Hollywood, CA. As Eddie Wong explained in his interview, he was influenced by Malcolm X's critique of intergenerational dynamics among colonized subjects, and sought to re-examine his relationship with his father. He also sought to challenge the stereotype of the subservient Chinese laundryman by portraying Franklin as a person with "a whole other life that most people would never see" in this film.[24] Wong Sinsaang featured almost no synchronous voices. The first time Franklin Wong's voice is heard is when he sings a Chinese lullaby or folk song over images of him working in his shop. Later in the film, he is heard bantering with his customers, while related non-synchronous images of him serving them are shown. These sound and image pairings do not follow the conventions of a realist audio-visual relationship. Nevertheless, selected sound bites from seemingly prosaic conversations between Wong and his customers are looped on the film's soundtrack to highlight the underlying power dynamics in their interactions. Here the impressionistic and ethnographic effect of the non-synchronized dialogue is pierced through by the sharp political critique in Eddie Wong's use of the looped voices. Repeated exchanges such as: "Nice shirt…" "Yeah, let's keep it that way, okay? Bye bye!" between Wong and his predominantly white customers cumulatively accentuate their condescension and Wong's subservience. In a voiceover narration that follows this sequence, Eddie Wong further points out that his father's "laundryman mask"—his daily performance of the stereotype of the "docile, quiet, courteous little Chinaman"—hides a secret world "shaped by

poetry, painting, scholarly essays."[25] We are offered one more glimpse of Franklin Wong's unspoken (to an English-only audience) subjectivity in the film: when he answers two brief questions from the filmmaker.[26] Wong's succinct and pragmatic answers to his son's questions about his experience as a Chinese laundryman show just how little his verbalized subjectivity corresponds to Eddie Wong's liberationist position. Indeed, the comprehensible subject position in Wong Sinsaang is expressed in Eddie Wong's Asian American voice. At the end of the film, Franklin Wong's hidden subjectivity is shown more fully in a sequence that shows him writing Chinese poetry and practicing martial arts, while traditional Chinese music plays on the soundtrack.[27] However, whether his culturally specific activities here are fully comprehensible to a non-Chinese and non-Chinese speaking audience, or even to his Asian American son, is questionable.

Manzanar (1970) directed by Robert Nakamura, another Ethno-Communications graduate and VC founding member, shares some of Wong Sinsaang's tactics in using culturally specific 'voices' to convey impressionistically and emotively the experience of Japanese American internment during World War II. The filmic images alternate between location shots at the site of the interment camp of the film's title, and archival images: camp photographs, newsreel and propaganda images, President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, anti-Japanese signage and documents from that period in U.S. history. Traditional Japanese music, parts of which include vocal singing, infuses the soundtrack of the film.[28] When paired with archival images of Japanese American camp life, the music evokes a sense of pathos and loss. The music becomes more active, and in some places, synchronized to the image in the contemporary shots, in which a moving, hand-held camera travels through the ruins of the former internment camp accompanied by the rapid plucking of stringed instruments.[29] The POV shot in these sequences

convey a subjective sense of haunting, as if we are seeing through the eyes of a ghost who has returned to its past life in search of something… perhaps its own history? The music in Manzanar functions as a 'voice' linking the past generation's historical trauma, and the present generation's search for an identity that is linked to that trauma. Nakamura's own voiceover narration, in which he reminisces about his experience as a six-year old living in the camp with his parents, also connects the past and the present.[30] However, the voices of the adults who lived through this experience remained silent in the conventional sense - only evoked in the film through their absence and incomprehension.[31] Nakamura and Wong both accentuated absence and incomprehension as important expressive qualities in the Asian American 'voice,' which may seem counter-productive in the collective cultural and political project of claiming that voice. Here, I argue that these vocal opacities are key to the representation of the Asian American 'voice' as subjectivity. Namely, gaps in understanding and miscommunication, both in terms of language as well as cultural meaning, are important facets within the immigrant experience—not just for Asian Americans, but for most immigrant and diasporic communities.

## Syncretism, Asynchronicity, Voiceovers

In Danny Kwan's film Homecoming Game (1970), we hear from many Asian American voices. Unlike the two previously discussed films from "In The Beginning", Kwan's filmic portrait of a contemporary Asian American community of recovering drug users features predominantly scenes with synchronous sound. In these vignettes, Asian American young men and women talk, argue, flirt, joke, dance, laugh, chant political slogans, and are interviewed about their drug use and experience in gangs. We watch and listen to these young Asian Americans in a variety of

settings, ranging from a happening at Stanford University to swimming outdoors and lifting weights to playing a verbosely contentious game of Scrabble. For the most part, they interact in informal and spontaneous ways, their speech exemplifying the vernacular "hip" or "jive" talk honed through an urban upbringing. These Asian Americans are bi or multi-lingual like the older generation portrayed in Wong Sinsaang and Manzanar, but they speak a multicultural tongue. In Homecoming Game, it is perfectly natural to hear an East LA Chicano accent coming out of a Japanese American mouth, or an Asian women freely peppering her speech with African American street slang.

The vernacular and hybrid voices in Homecoming Game speak an Asian American 'voice' that is streetwise and unapologetic. It is a syncretic 'voice' that is created out of American popular culture, multicultural and multi-lingual urban communities, as well as the rebellion and militancy of 1960s social protest movements and counter culture. In the film, synch-sound sequences are punctuated by ones in which filmic images are played over popular music or voiceover narration. Popular songs by The Angels and Classics IV are play over handheld panning shots of the neighborhood (similar to the subjective POV shots in Manzanar).[32] Interviews start off in the "talking heads" direct address mode, then veer off into disembodied voiceovers paired with images of construction sites and vacant lots. There is a particularly powerful sequence in which a young Asian woman talks about trying to look white by taping her eyelids in high school. Her recollection of trying to conform to hegemonic standards of beauty is tempered by her realization that such cosmetic alterations of her racialized features make her look "cheap… like a low person."[33] Her voiceover narration is played over a slow motion image of an Asian woman with taped eyelids and heavy make-up. We do not see or hear from this woman again in the rest of the film, so we never find out whether the woman on

film is the same person speaking on the soundtrack. This uncoupling of the image and sound disrupts the conventions of documentary verisimilitude that her testimonial voice leads one to expect. However, the effect here is that her specific experience becomes one that many can (and do) share. It opens her voice up and into a 'voice' that signifies collective utterance. This is underscored by the song "Something About Me Today," that plays while she is speaking. Composed and performed by Asian American folk musicians Chris Iijima, Nobuko Miyamoto, and Charlie Chin, "Something About Me Today" reinforces the powerful effect of a multivocal utterance, in which many voices resonate in a communal political awakening.[34]

Other Ethno-Communications films in the program, including Yellow Brotherhood (1970) directed by Brian Tadashi Maeda, I Don't Think I Said Much (1973) directed by Jeff Furumura, and Sleepwalker (1971-2) directed by Laura Ho, similarly de-emphasize synchronous sound in their representation of Asian American subjectivity. Yellow Brotherhood features shots of an all-male Asian American motorcycle gang played over sounds of engine revving and 1960s counter cultural rock anthems by Jethro Tull and Steppenwolf, placing this film within the tropes of countercultural representation—a lá Easy Rider (1969)—albeit with an Asian American twist.[35] A male voiceover alternates with the rock songs on the soundtrack, riffing on issues ranging from Asian American identity politics to gang life. Again, it is a voice that is not synchronized to a specific speaker or person in the film. Nonetheless, its rough quality and barely comprehensible speech—filled expletives and street slang—makes it a fitting 'voice' for the Asian American gang members.[36] I Don't Think I Said Much also de-emphasizes synchronous voices in its portrayal of two Japanese American gardeners. In a shot where one of the gardeners is shown digging in the earth while synchronous location sound can be heard, Furumura chose to mix in his voiceover narration. The circumstances of the shot leads us to

believe voice and image should be synchronized, yet we can see clearly that the subject's mouth is not moving even though his voice is speaking on the soundtrack. The film juxtaposes the voices of the gardeners, their employers, passers-by, and family members to create a complex, multi-generational, internal and externalized portrait of the Japanese American gardener. The film's title ironically refers to the inter-racial dynamics between the multiple voices on the soundtrack, where the racist assumption of the employer that "there must be something in the Japanese nature and character that allows them to do this kind of hard work without complaint" rings dissonant against the more internalized reflections of the gardener recalling his life growing up in internment camps and his love of Suiseki – the Japanese art of rock gardening and stone appreciation. While the subject's visual silence (we never see the gardeners speak on camera) is accentuated by the predominant use of voiceover in I Don't Think I Said Much, the partially translated voiceover of his mother, in Japanese, further positions speech as a culturally specific act that is only entirely comprehensible to a Japanese-speaking audience. The de-emphasis of synchronized speech and sound in this program of early Asian American independent cinema finds its most radical expression in Laura Ho's Sleepwalker, which does not feature any speech at all. The film, shot in black and white 16mm film, shows an Asian female protagonist wondering in the urban setting of 1970s Los Angeles. She remains silent throughout the film. Its initially realist soundtrack of urban street noise gradually mixes with sounds of sea gulls, wind, and then an electronic drone, similar to whale calls, which drowns out the more realist location sounds. This sonic departure from realism is accompanied by increasingly expressive cinematography, surreal scenarios, superimposed images, and symbolic objects that recall the avant-garde filmic language of Maya Deren's Meshes in The Afternoon (1943). This connection

between experimental media by women and representations of female subjectivity in relation to voice and language is not arbitrary, and will be brought up again at the end of this chapter.

There are most likely practical reasons for the predominance of non-synchronized sound in these first-generation Asian American independent films. Firstly, they were all shot in 16mm or 8mm film, where image and sound are recorded separately, if at all. To shoot images with synchronous sound would have required the relative luxury of additional equipment, tape stock, and crew members, which these independent filmmakers could not afford, or chose not to. Secondly, synchronizing sound and image in post-production also requires additional processes, equipment, and expertise for the filmmaker or editor; thus bigger budgets, more work prints, and access to more expensive post-production facilities. Thirdly, these films all embraced an experimental approach to filmmaking, following the examples of Third Cinema as well as avant-garde and underground films rather than Hollywood features, traditional documentaries, or network television. The de-emphasis of conventionally synchronous audio-visual relationships is as much a result of these rough-and-tumble low-budget student films as it is an "anti-slick" aesthetic choice. When we do hear Asian American voices in these films, they are predominantly in voiceover narrations that are not necessarily attributed to a visual image of a speaker. These disembodied voices are what Michel Chion calls acousmêtres: disembodied voices that, "belong to the cinema and to it alone."[37] In Chion's theorization of the acousmêtre, he imbues its voice (and sometimes it is only a voice) with an almost supernatural power, which he attributes to its possible biological and religious origin.[38] More relevant to our discussion here is the figure of the montreur d'images, the off-screen narrator and vocal performer who accompanied proto-cinematic media presentations such as magic lantern shows and slide lectures, as well as silent film screenings. The montreur d'images provide context, narrate

stories, as well as impersonate characters and provide sound effects for these early and proto-cinematic media forms.[39] Their voices variously enhance, prescribe, and suggest meaning for the images that the audiences at the time were watching. Although Chion's theorization of the acousmêtre is primarily concerned with feature narrative films, his discussion is also relevant to other filmic forms, including documentary, in which the "voice of god" narrator is often deployed to provide meaning for the images seen. Although their approaches to documenting Asian American experiences are more experimental than in traditional documentary, the Ethno-Communications filmmakers nonetheless utilize voiceover narration as their primary device to represent Asian American subjecthood. When heard, these voices enhance and often significantly complicate the meaning of the images seen, resulting in the creation of complex audio-visual representations. Eddie Wong's narration politicizes the mundane shots of his father tending shop and serving customers. Robert Nakamura's childhood recollection in Manzanar infuses an otherwise barren desert landscape with the erased history of Japan American internment, which is further evoked by the traditional Japanese vocal music and "absent" sounds. The taped eyelid scene in Homecoming Game challenges white hegemonic beauty standards, again through a personal recollection that broadens into a collective 'voice' for Asian American women. The vernacular and street-wise voiceover in Yellow Brotherhood enhances and livens the syncretic images of Asian American bikers and inflects them further with a distinct but unexpected "ethnic" accent. The juxtaposition between the different voices in I Don't Think I Said Much contrasts the complex lived experiences the Japanese American gardeners with other's simplistic stereotype of them, and gives 'voice' to an otherwise muted image of the model minority.

## Conclusion: Hearing the Negative Voice; Absence and Materiality

Heard as a collective Asian American 'voice,' the voices in "In The Beginning" are multi-generational, multi-lingual, and syncretic. They are vernacular, streetwise, unapologetic, anti-slick and often ironic. They are multicultural, reflecting the influence of their native tongues, U.S. popular culture, and they hybridize with and emulate other racialized counter cultural voices of the 1960s and '70s. These voices are also predominantly male. Although Asian American women's voices are included in Homecoming Game and I Don't Think I Said Much, it is important to note that in Sleepwalker—the only work from the Ethno-Communications program that is directed by a woman—the Asian American female protagonist is silent throughout the film. It is not until the second and third generations of Asian American independent media production that we see women playing directorial roles.[40]

In an interview with Laleen Jayamane and Anne Rutherford, Vietnamese American filmmaker and cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha discusses the potential and pitfalls she perceives in the act of claiming a feminist voice within the context of her film Surname Viet Given Name Nam (1989):

> "… the question of empowering women through speech is highly problematic, because women's relationship with language and speech has always been an uncomfortable one. Language, of course, is never neutral. It is the site where power relationships are most complex and pernicious; yet it is also a place of liberation."[41]

Trinh's ambivalence towards "empowering women through speech" is echoed in a number of powerful moments in the Asian American independent media discussed thus far: an excerpt in

Claiming A Voice from Renee Tajima-Peña and Christine Choy's 1988 documentary Who Killed Vincent Chin? in which Chin's mother, distraught at the death of her son, struggles to speak at a press conference is powerful in its abject inarticulateness. Laura Ho's silent female protagonist is another "negative" voice that articulates the marginalization of Asian American women in the Ethno-Communications films by not speaking at all. Indeed, moments of inarticulateness and the breakdown of verbal communication abound in experimental media produced by Asian American women in the 1980s and '90s. What is fascinating about these moments and breakdowns is that they are powerfully expressive of the subjectivity of Asian American women and men; and that this expressivity rejects or moves beyond speech and verbal communication.

Rea Tajiri's 1991 experimental video History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige documents her family's experience with Japanese American internment by weaving together a plethora of 'voices,' including newsreel footage; propaganda films made by both U.S. and Japanese governments; Hollywood films, for example From Here to Eternity (1953, Dir. Fred Zinnemann), that depict events from World War II; as well as letters from and conversations with her family members. However, these 'voices' are structured around an central absence in History and Memory - the refusal of Tajiri's mother to speak about her internment experiences. Her mother's claim that she does not remember life in the camps is silently witnessed by the ghost of her grandfather in the video. A "negative" voice that structures all the other 'voices' in the video, it is, to quote Fredric Jameson, the "spectrality [that] makes the present waver."[42] In another experimental documentary on the effects of Japanese American internment, Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway? (1992) video artist Janice Tanaka searches for her father, whom she has not seen since age three. When she finds him in a convalescent home for

the mentally ill, ravaged by his internment experience and various treatments for his schizophrenia (including electro-shock treatment) their conversations recorded on video are characterized by inarticulateness, memory loss, and mis-recognition. Even his ability to speak is compromised by his ordeal, as his illness is primarily represented on video through his difficulty in voicing coherent speech, and in the involuntary movements of his mouth. Speech, these works seem to suggest, is inadequate when it comes to articulating the experiences of historical trauma, such as Japanese American internment, that is symptomatic of racism and other inter-cultural misunderstanding. For many Asian Americans, the limitation of language is compounded by the fact that we inhabit cross-cultural, immigrant, and diasporic communities that are multi-lingual. In the opening sequence of Soo Jim Kim's Comfort Me (1993), partially voiced words, fragments of syllables, and visual text on screen (in)articulate the title of the video, which the audience has to literally piece back it together using the disparate sounds and images, and filling in where there is silence. In the video's layered soundtrack, the most expressive 'voice' is not the verbally communicative voiceover narrating the history of Korean comfort women in World War II, but rather, the monotonous counting and the exaggerated scrubbing sound played over close-up images of an Asian woman repeatedly and obsessively washing herself. Here, the effect is similar to what Michel Chion calls the "anempathetic effect," in which the "indifferent and automatic unwinding" of a sound is in and of itself expressive.[43] In Comfort Me, the monotonous counting on the soundtrack bespeaks the repetitive and unending series of sexual violence the comfort women had to endure, until they were "simply left to die, or shot." Additionally, the loud and exaggerated scrubbing sound can be understood in relation to what Roland Barthes calls the "grain of the voice." In Barthes' theorization, which is primarily focused on singing, the grain of the voice is "not what it says, but the voluptuousness of its

sound-signifiers, of its letters—where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work. It is, in a very simple word but which must be taken seriously, the *diction* of the language."[44] In my adaptation here, the scrubbing sound, as the grain of the video's 'voice,' voluptuously engenders a sense of the discomfort in the auditor. Listening to this difficult and grating sound while watching the close-up images of the woman washing herself, the audience may feel in their own bodies a sensorial embodiment of the trauma the comfort women had to endure.

I have argued in a published study of Tran T. Kim-Trang's experimental video <u>Blindness Series</u> (1992-2006) that the materiality of a voice, and not its content, can become the primary conveyor of meaning.[45] In Tran's <u>Ekleipsis</u> (1998), the trauma endured by a group of Cambodian women refugees might have been be so horrific that it caused them to become hysterically blind. Or rather, these women—the largest group of hysterically blind people in the world—chose blindness over the "eye-searing horrors" they witnessed on a daily basis in the Khmer Rouge labor camps. The subjectivity of these women is represented by a voiceover narration in the video. Yet, the sound of this voiceover is so processed and distorted that the words are practically incomprehensible. I wrote: "Tran is able to create a voice in which its grain, corporeally implicated deep inside our bodies, can both give us a sense of the horrors these women experienced and impinge upon us the impossible struggle of articulating their experience in rational speech and language."[46] In other words, the materiality of this voice is its meaning. This emphasis on the materiality of the voice as subjective expression both affirms and expands upon the possible interpretations of Derrida's theory of auto-affection, in which "To speak to someone is doubtless to hear oneself speak, to be heard by oneself; but, at the same time, if one is heard by another, to speak is to make him <u>repeat immediately</u> in himself the hearing-oneself-

speak…" In these Asian American women's 'voices,' what one hears (oneself speak) is not speech but the materiality of the voice—its grain.[47] The questions raised by these experimental media works are echoed in on-going debates and discussions on the complex relationship between voice, speech, and subjectivity within philosophy and linguistics. Italian philosopher and feminist thinker Adriana Cavarero writes in her book For More Than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression: "Voice is sound, not speech. But speech constitutes its essential destination. What is therefore at stake in any inquiry into the ontology of the voice—where uniqueness and relationality come to the fore—is a rethinking, without metaphysical prejudices, of this destination."[48] While Slovene philosopher Mladen Dolar asserts: "…faced with the voice, words structurally fail."[49] In our on-going effort to claim a 'voice' as Asian Americans, it is certainly important to continue to listen to the syncretic, multi-lingual, multi-generational, vernacular, unapologetic, and anti-slick voices, but it is equally important that we also listen for the inarticulate, difficult or impossible to translate 'voice'; the non-verbal sounds we make; our refusal to speak; the spaces in between the words; the silences.

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[1]http://www.deepfocusproductions.com/claiming_a_voice.php Accessed 2.7.2015

[2] See Stephan Gong, "A History in Progress: Asian American Media Arts Centers 1970-1990" in Moving The Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts. Russell Leong, ed. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, 1991, 1-9. Also in Screening Asian Americans. Peter X. Feng, ed. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002, 101-110. It is no accident that Visual Communications, commonly and affectionately known as "VC" within the Asian Pacific Islander and media arts communities, chose their acronym to match with that of the Viet Cong—a reflection of the counter-cultural origins and "anti-slick"

aesthetic stance of the first generation of Asian American independent filmmaker. (Renee Tajima, "Moving The Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking 1970-1990," in Moving The Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts, 10-33.)

[3] "I went down to LA in the late '60s, in 1968, to start [school] at UCLA. When I got there, all hell was breaking loose all over the country: the anti-war movement was in full swing. At the same time, groups of Asians were meeting on UCLA's campus, trying to figure what their identity is, or should be. I think we were greatly influenced by the Third World Liberation Front, which at the time was led really by the Panthers—the Black Panthers—on campus. But many of us who were Asian American saw that we had a role to play." Duane Kubo interview from Claiming A Voice: The Visual Communications Story (1990) Directed by Arthur Dong. Transcribed by author.

[4] The full text of Mababot's interview from Claiming A Voice: "That meant that we were beginning to seek self-determination for people of color in this country, and Visual Communications was a part of this whole movement of seeing how we can utilize media as a form to 'empower our communities.' So in terms of the arts, that meant creating our own images that counter the stereotypical images that were in the media, that were really racist. Since the early days of silent films, the media has portrayed us as one-dimensional caricatures - whether they be cartoons for kids, or popular entertainment for mainstream America. VC's goal was to produce accurate and sensitive material about the Asian American experience and about our history. Prior to the 1970s, there were no materials available." Transcribed by author. Also see Mabalot's obituary in LA Times Online http://articles.latimes.com/2003/may/29/local/me-mabalot29 Accessed 2.8.2016.

[5] These films include Kite and Other Tales (1975, directed by Alan Ohashi), City City (1972, directed by Duane Kubo), Chinatown 2-Step (1975, directed by Eddie Wong), Omai Fa'atasi (1979, directed by Takashi Fuji) and Hito Hata; Raise the Banner (1980, directed by Duane Kubo and Robert Nakamura), and others that feature Asian and Pacific Islander experiences as their subject matter.

[6] Wong interview from Claiming A Voice. Transcribed by author.

[7] "We are the Children" performed by Chris Iljima, Nobuko Miyamoto, and Charlie Chin is played during the opening credits of Claiming A Voice. The jazz fusion band Hiroshima is the subject of Duane Kubo's 1974 film Cruisin' J-Town and is shown performing and rehearsing in the film. Japanese American poet Lawson Inada is the subject of Alan Kondo's 1974 film I Told You So. Both Cruisin' J-Town and I Told You So are excerpted in Claiming A Voice.

[8] Jonathan Sterne, "Introduction to Part VI: Voices," in The Sound Studies Reader, Jonathan Sterne ed. New York: Routledge, 2012, 491.

[9] See Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics. London: Duckworth, 1983; Marshall McLuhan, The Guttenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962; Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word. London: Methuen & Co/Routledge, 1982/1988. Expand? Check these sources

[10] See, for example, Edumund Husserl, Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson, New York: Collier Books, 1962; and Don Ihde, Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1976. (Second edition, 2007)

[11]Jacques Derrida, "The Voice that Keeps Silence," in Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs. Trans., D.B. Allison. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 80. Perhaps compare to Don Ihde's Listening and Voice?

[12] Ibid. 79.

[13] Michel Chion, The Voice in Cinema. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 5. Chion's concepts of 'vococentrism' and 'verbocentrism' also highlight the centrality of the human voice in film sound. See The Voice in Cinema, 5-6; and Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 6. It is important to note that Chion's theories of film sound are derived from his study of predominantly feature narrative films from the U.S., Europe, and Japan.

[14] Chion, The Voice in Cinema, 61-62.

[15] Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Bloomington, I.N.: Indiana University Press, 1988, 72.

[16] See Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror; Amy Lawrence, Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991; Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema" The Articulation of Body and Space," in Film Sound: Theory and Practice. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, 162-176.

[17] Anthologies that collected the interdisciplinary and feminist musicology scholarship on voice from this period include Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture. Leslie C. Dunn, and Nancy C. Jones,

eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 and Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera, Mary Ann Smart, ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.
[18] Need scholarship on race, voice, subjectivity.
[19] This program "In The Beginning: A 30th Anniversary Salute to Asian American Ethnography" was curated by Abraham Ferrer, Exhibitions Director at Visual Communications and Director of Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival for the 1990 Los Angeles Arts Festival, and included works by graduate as well as undergraduate students in Ethno-Communications' first and second classes. Ethno-Communications began in November 1969.
[20] Russell Leong, "Introduction: To Open The Future," in Moving The Image, xx. Also see Renee Tajima, "Ethno-Communications: The Film School Program That Changed The Color of Independent Filmmaking," in The Anthology of Asian Pacific Film and Video, New York: Third World Newsreel, 1985, 38-42.
[21] There were certainly Asian media makers and artists working in the United States prior to the 1970s. Most of them were associated with the visual arts, including Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Nam June Paik, Shigeko Kubota, and Yoko Ono; or avant-garde and underground film, including Fu-Ding Cheng, Arne Wong, and the Yonemoto brothers. However, I argue that the Ethno-Communications filmmakers are unique in three ways: one, their critical mass; two, their direct connection to social protest movements of the 1960s and '70s, especially to grassroots political and cultural organizing amongst Asian Americans; and three, the influence of graduates, such as the founders of Visual Communications including Wong, Kubo, Nakamura, and others.
[22] See Tajima, 20-21, in which she discusses the aesthetics and production conditions for the ideology of "anti-slick", as well as its contradictions for first and second generation Asian American independent filmmakers.
[23] In addition to Wong, other Ethno-Communications graduate who were involve in the early days of VS are Robert Nakamura, Duane Kubo, Alan Ohashi, and Steven Tatsukawa.
[24] Eddie Wong interview from Claiming A Voice. Transcribed by author.
[25] "I never knew much about my father as a child. As I grew older, I never really saw him behind his laundryman mask, behind the chink – that stereotypic, docile, quiet, courteous little Chinaman, deferring obediently to 'baak gwai' – the white man. I never understood how a man could put up with the daily humiliations from his obnoxious white customers, or the deadliness of the twelve-hour grind. I loved him, as son to father, child to god, as much as I held him in contempt as brother-to-brother, man-to-man. But I really didn't know him; or that he really didn't below in that laundry in Hollywood, U.S.A.; or that when he worked, he dreams about a world shaped by poetry, painting, scholarly essays… all the while transcending and resisting 'baak gwai.'" (Eddie Wong's voiceover narration in Wong Sinsaang, transcribed by author.)
[26] EW: How long have you been in the laundry business?
FW: Oh… for twenty-one years
EW: What do you…What do you think about it?
FW: Can't think about it, just make living.
(Dialogue between Eddie Wong (EW) and Franklin Wong (FW) from Wong Sinsaang, transcribed by author.)
[27] The music is classical Chinese composition "Fisherman's Song at Dusk" (漁舟唱晚).
[28] The music is by the Azuma Kabuki Musicians, from an album of the same title (Columbia Masterworks, 1954), and are excerpted from "Ocho" (Ancient Courst Days), "O-Matsuribayashi" (Festival Music), "Nagare" (Water Images), and other tracks.
[29] The instruments are most likely shamisens. In a review of the record, William P. Malm wrote: "The music is derived nagauta tradition and technically speaking is not kabuki but a classical dance (buyo) music, although the ensemble of shamisens, three drums, two flutes, and occasional coloristic gongs and folk drums is the same." (Record Review of The Azuma Kabuki Musicians, in Ethnomusicology, Vol. 7, No. 1, Jan., 1963, 58)
[30] "It's very difficult to describe things in detail. I was only six years old, so I really can't remember anything definite… just vague impressions. I think I remember feelings and smells and sounds – things that really impressed me. One incident that sticks in my mind was when the FBI came and took away our next-door neighbor. He was very active in judo and kendo, and I used to play with his two daughters. As a matter of fact, I was at their home when the two FBI agents came by. I remember looking at them through the screen door, and then later, my neighbor's wife telling me to go home. I remember that evening my dad was very agitate… seeing he was also very active in judo.

We were one of the luckier families because we weren't separated. When we did go to the camp, at least we were able to go together. Many families were separated. Second day I was there, I stepped out of our barracks and went to the bathroom, which was about 150 yards away, and as I came back, I suddenly realized I didn't know which barrack my folks were in. They all looked alike, they are all black tar paper barracks and there was absolutely

at that time nothing to distinguish one from the other, unless you can read the numbers, which at that time I couldn't. I remember crying, and finally my dad coming out and taking me inside. After that incident, we got a piece of redwood from some place, and carved our name on it. I couldn't really read at that time, so we put a huge index finger pointing to the name 'Nakamura,' and I was able to find our barrack by that sign.

For the most part, my folks seemed very cheerful. I guess they actually kept up a front for my sake… just now and then do I get an idea on how they felt, especially with my mom… One incident really sticks in my mind: the day I bought a bad report card home, and I recall she was sitting there ironing, and I showed her the report card, and she looked at my and burst into tears – that really made an impression on me. Now I realize what she was really crying about…" (Robert Nakamura's voiceover narration in Manzanar. Transcribed by author.)

[31] Sound elements used to evoke absence in the film include sounds of water and of children playing played over images of the deserted ruins of the camp's grounds and barracks.

[32] The tracks include The Angels' "My Boyfriend's Back" (7" single, Smash Records, 1963) and "Traces" by Classics IV (7" single, Imperial Records, 1968)

[33] "I remember when I was in high school, when all the chicks used to wear scotch tape - to make their eyes look double. I guess it was what you would call the stereotype of white chicks… you know, like white chicks, because you got pretty eyes, you know? You put it on your lids, to make a fold, to make it double. That… took a long time to do if you were not used to the scotch tape, but it was really half a lid. When I got into high school we had to take swimming. I was still putting my scotch tape on, so that was really a handful! When you get into the water, the scotch tape and make-up comes off, and you don't want to go around campus looking like a [laughs] That was really… awful. But then as you grow up, and when time passed by, you start realizing… you know… you see younger chicks doing the same thing that you did. So I said, it was the same for me, and that makes it worse. It makes you look really cheap, you know, like a low person, really low… [audio cuts off] (Voiceover narration in Homecoming Game, un-credited. Transcribed by author.)

[34] "Something About Me Today" Words and music: Nobuko Miyamoto and Chris Iijima; Side 1, Band 4 (3:35) A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle by Asians in America by Chris Kando Iijima, Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, and "Charlie" Chin (1973 Paredon Records)

"I knew there was something in about me
today (2x)
I walk tall, and look at all the things in a
different way.
I knew there was something different
about me today.

I looked in the mirror,
And I saw me.
And I didn't want to be
Any other way.
Then I looked around,
And I saw you.
And it was the first time I knew
Who we really are.

And we walked
Feeling the ground we'd someday own,
not alone
And I knew there was something different
And I feel us growing stronger, building
something new
Building something new, and I knew
I knew there was something different
about me today…

I looked in the mirror, etc…

[35] Songs used in the film's soundtrack include "Dharma for One" by Jethro Tull (This Was, 1969, Island Records) as well as "Magic Carpet Ride" (The Second, 1968, ABC Dunhill Records) and "Born To Be Wide" (45-single, 1967, Dunhill RCA Records) by Steppenwolf. "Born To Be Wild" is played over the opening credits of Easy Rider (1969, Dir. Dennis Hopper).
[36] Since what the voice describes, including social protest, the Black Panthers, and towards the end of a film - a staged fight in a pool hall, are shown as images in the film, we are led to assume the voiceover is an interview with one of the men in the motorcycle gang.
[37] Chion, The Voice in Cinema, 4.
[38] Chion has attributed the possible origins of the acousmêtre to "a Pythagorean sect whose followers would listen to their Master speak behind a curtain" (an idea most-likely inspired by Pierre Schaeffer) as well as to an infant's hearing of the first voice—its mother's—while still in her womb. See The Voice in Cinema, 18-23, 61-62.
[39] For a discussion of film lecture practices in the U.S. from 1890s to 1950s, see Rick Altman, Silent Film Sound, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 133-155.
[40] While Asian women media artists, including Shigeko Kubota, and Yoko Ono, have been making avant-garde and experimental media in the U.S. since the 1960s, self-identified Asian American women filmmakers, including Tajima-Peña herself, Christine Choy, J.T. Takagi, Loni Ding, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Valerie Soe, Janice Tanaka, and others did not start making documentary and experimental media (films and videos) until the 1980s. In the late 1980s and 1990s, a younger generation including Rea Tajiri, Freida Lee Mock, Tran T. Kim-Trang, Angel Velasco Shaw, Mari Keiko Gonzales, Grace Lee, Meena Nanji, Kayo Hatta and others produced media ranging from feature narratives to video art.
[41] Trinh T. Minh-ha, Framer Framed. New York: Routledge, 1992, 169-170.
[42] The scenes with the grandfather's ghost are shown in text form, as descriptions of scenes in a film. Quote is from Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," New Left Review 209 (Jan/Feb 1995), quoted in Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters. Minneapolis, M.N.: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 168. For more discussions on how memory is represented in Tajiri's video, see Marita Sturken, "The Politics of Video Memory: Electronic Erasures and Inscriptions," in Screening Asian Americans, 173-184; Glen Mimura, "Antidote for Collective Amnesia" Rea Tajiri's Germinal Image," in Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, eds. Philadelphis, P.A: Temple University Press, 2000, 150-162; as well as Feng, Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video, 68-100; Mimura, The Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video. Minneapolis, M.N.; University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 81-119; and Laura U. Marks, The Skin of The Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000.
[43] Chion, Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen, 8-9.
[44] Roland Barthes,"The Grain of the Voice," in On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds. London: Routledge, 2000, 294-295.
[45] See "The Voice of Blindness: On The Sound Tactics of Tran T. Kim-Trang's Blindness Series" in Resolutions 3: Global Networks of Video. Ming-Yuen S. Ma and Erika Suderburg, eds., Minneapolis, M.N.: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, 65-80.
[46] Ibid., 75.
[47] Derrida, "The Voice that Keeps Silence," 80.
[48] Adriana Cavarero, Introduction, For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 1-16 (Sound Studies Reader, 529)
[49] Mladen Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, 13.