

Sounding Orientalism: Radical Sounds and Affects of Asian American Women Who  
Rock

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## Abstract

This dissertation explores the radical and queer voices of Asian American women rock musicians and influencers who are often sidelined in scholarship on American popular music by articulating local, national, and transnational forces on racial formation, musical affects, and Asian American experiences. It unsettles the idea that Orientalized aesthetics and affects are tools only for nefarious agendas by exploring how a number of Asian American women artists transform musical Orientalism into a political form of art. In so doing, I argue that these musicians devise novel and socially efficacious ways to effectively debunk the myth of Asian American apoliticism. Over the course of four chapters, my case studies range from the entirely fabricated “oriental riff” to post-punk’s postmodern experimentations, from the first notable Asian-women-fronted rock band Fanny to recent musical ventures like Japanese Breakfast and the Drag-On Ladies, and from musical movements such as women’s music, queercore, and riot grrrl to Los Angeles’ Chinatown and Little Tokyo. Through articulating the relationship between sound, race, and affect with these case studies, I contend that the sounds, affective inscrutability, and diasporic sensibilities of Asian America have powerfully redefined U.S. radicalism and challenged hegemonic formulations of what musical activism looks like, feels like, and sounds like. An interdisciplinary project situated at the intersection of communication and critical media studies, Asian American studies, popular music studies, and gender and feminist studies, this dissertation will yield the first book on Asian American rock music.

My methodology involves a range of politically engaged qualitative and critical approaches: digital archival research, oral history, musical analysis, and close reading and

critical and cultural analysis of representative musical performances and media texts from the 1960s to the present. The dissertation collects and examines a variety of qualitative data, including materials from both traditional and unconventional archives: e.g., Rock's Backpages, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Women Who Rock Oral History Archive, and grassroots and crowdsourced materials, such as playlists, blog posts, and encyclopedias about women rock musicians and Asian American music. To tackle the paucity of formally documented Asian American popular music history, it also entails conducting oral histories with a range of musicians, such as Cambodian American musician Bohan Huy, Korean American Adoptee musician Mayda Miller, and biracial Chinese American musician Leslie Mah, regarding their life, musical journey, and creative devices. Other relevant data include cultural productions (music; performances; merchandise), personal narratives (zines; memoirs; interviews; social media), and published media discourses (documentaries; news media; music criticism). Although the documentation of Asian American women in rock is relatively scarce, a variety of materials nonetheless provide a rich basis for better understanding their complex affective, rhetorical, and cultural prowess.

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