

NO-NO BOY



昭和17年

**ANNOTATED LYRICS BY
JULIAN SAPORITI
FOREWARD BY ERIN AOYAMA**

No-No Boy

昭和17年 (1942)

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** Before our fall 2018 tour, I asked my classmate turned No-No Boy bandmate Erin Aoyama to compose an essay for this lyric book as a way of explaining the project for fans who might buy the now sold out paperback version or for teachers and students who might find this useful in the classroom. Erin and I only worked together for a little over a year but her contributions to No-No Boy were very important to me. This essay is a fine example of her ability to clearly relate complicated theories and histories to public audiences, a skill which is all too rare in academia and something I greatly appreciated during her time with the project. — JS*

FOREWARD*

by Erin Aoyama

When Julian asked if I would write an introduction to this annotated lyric book, I jumped at the chance. I was enthusiastic about putting down on paper so much of what we have spent the last year discussing, debating, and pulling apart. It would take no time at all, I naively thought, because we've spent so much time thinking about this project. Well, maybe unsurprisingly, I was very mistaken because when I actually sat down to write, I was stumped. Turns out it's a daunting task, attempting to distill into a few pages the wide-ranging and intricate conversations that have emerged around each No-No Boy concert or workshop. So I make no claim of thoroughness here. Instead, this introduction is just that – an introduction to this first album, 1942, and to a few pieces of the framework, the philosophy, and the motivation behind No-No Boy.

Julian and I, individually at first, gravitated towards studying Japanese American incarceration in the midst of politicians and pundits invoking FDR's decision in the early 1940s to evacuate and incarcerate over 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry as acceptable legal precedent for, to name one example, creating a registry for Muslim and Arab Americans. In fact, we first met as fellow participants on the Brown University Japanese American Incarceration Mobile Workshop, affectionately dubbed the JAIN Mob. The mobile workshop, the brainchild of our friend and colleague Nicole Sintetos, was conceived of as an investigation into the praxis of place-based scholarship – literally visiting sites of exclusion and incarceration to learn from the land itself and the memory held therein. It was on the mobile workshop that Julian first asked if I wanted to try singing harmony on some of his songs. Days later, I found myself onstage next to him in Portland, Oregon, opening for Kishi Bashi at a benefit concert to raise funds for the unfortunately broke JAIN Mob. That evening was the first time I sang songs about Asian Americans.

No-No Boy as a project has evolved and grown enormously since that first show, but the significance of playing songs written about folks who look like us or who have families like ours has remained a central aspect of our work. In telling some of our stories – about my grandmother, incarcerated at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, during World War II or about Julian's mother, forced to leave Vietnam, her home country, because of an American war – we attempt to draw together histories that can be too easily compartmentalized and kept

separate in our history textbooks and in our national memory. Placing these kinds of histories next to each other and, at times, directly in conversation with one another, helps to dissolve some of the historical barriers that tend to cloud our understanding of the past and its continued acting force on our present.

We usually don't explain the meaning behind our name, No-No Boy, unless an audience member asks. This is in part because we hope that folks will go home and google it, to discover John Okada's 1957 novel or perhaps be introduced to the complicated legacy of the loyalty pledge administered to incarcerated Japanese Americans in 1943. We choose to leave our name unexplained as a reminder that history cannot, maybe ever, be told in its entirety.

There are a lot of stories we don't learn in our history classes. Julian and I, as kids growing up in the South and in New England, respectively, didn't learn about the histories that shaped the lives of our ancestors. I grew up with an awareness of some of my family's history, hearing the name "Heart Mountain" and light jokes about how pineapple made my grandpa's tongue itch because he ate too much of it as a kid, but I never saw people with last names like mine in my history textbooks or in the historical fiction novels I obsessively checked out of my local library. I loved my American history classes in middle and high school, but it wasn't until my first serious foray into Asian American studies during my junior year of college that I realized how much I didn't know. I felt a sharp sense of near-betrayal.

Gradually, I gained the confidence to start asking more and deeper questions about the histories that impacted my family most directly. I understand now that I shouldn't have needed to wait, but I also know that I'm still, to this day, figuring out what questions to ask and how to ask them. I hope that, through our partnerships with educators and their classes, the No-No Boy project can help students find and articulate the questions they need to ask to learn their own stories. Because if we want to illuminate the gaps in the archive of American history and begin to fill them in, we need to start with knowing our own histories.

In perhaps its purest form, No-No Boy, to me, is an attempt at a methodological intervention in how we teach and think about history, to frame it as questions and stories, rather than as our dead past or, on the other end of the spectrum, our doomed future. Too often, we are wed to textbooks that present histories as authoritatively complete despite gaping holes and incomplete narratives. We fail to reckon with how the decisions, the movements, and the trauma of

the past continue to inform our present. We try to cram something as complicated and nuanced as American history into a matter of months, rather than helping students understand that they can – and should – investigate their own stories and others that pique their interests. We need to acknowledge that the archive we have is, at best, incomplete. We need to ask questions about who and what gets left out – and why.

With the most minimal knowledge about a topic like Japanese American incarceration during World War II, it is possible to draw a connection between the treatment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s and the treatment of Muslim and Arab Americans in post-9/11 America. The facile nature of this connection, though, runs the risk of erasing many of the historical nuances that bridge so clearly between racialized injustices of the past and today. It is valuable, where possible, to have a deeper understanding of these connections in order to grasp more fully and more honestly our present. For example, if you learn about a history like Japanese American incarceration during school, rare for students outside of the West Coast, the story tends to start with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor when, in fact, it should start decades earlier.

As soon as the earliest waves of Japanese immigrants began arriving in the United States in the latter half of the 19th century, they stepped into an environment that was already strongly anti-Asian. Chinese laborers had arrived in the U.S. earlier in the century, as laborers on sugar plantations across the southeast then later finding work out west through the railroads and the gold rush. By 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, the first piece of legislation implemented to prevent an entire ethnic or national group from immigrating to the United States, though it built on earlier xenophobic laws like the 1875 Page Act. Anti-Asian sentiment only increased in the years following, exacerbated by racist ideologies like “Yellow Peril,” based in colonial fears of the danger posed to the Western world by East Asian people. These fears boiled over into riots, lynchings and massacres against Chinese communities in places like Los Angeles, Vancouver and Rock Springs. So, as Japanese immigrants began arriving in larger numbers, there were already patterns of violence against Asian immigrant communities and laws on the books actively working to prevent further immigration from Asia to the United States.

In 1903, the San Francisco School Board attempted to pass a measure that would segregate their schools, such that Japanese and Korean American children could not attend the same public schools as white children. In 1913, California passed the first Alien

Land Law, which meant that “aliens ineligible for citizenship” – which all Asian immigrants were labeled at this time – could not purchase or lease land for any long period of time. Several other states would follow suit. To get around these laws, many Japanese immigrants bought land in the names of their children, birthright American citizens – one example of Japanese immigrants putting down roots in the country they had chosen to adopt as their own, despite the laws put in place to prevent them from doing so.

The Johnson-Reed Act, also known as the 1924 Immigration Act, was a more final attempt to exclude all Asian immigrants from the United States. Though the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement between the U.S. and Japan, in which Japan voluntarily restricted the number of Japanese emigrants to the U.S., meant that Japan was excluded from the “Asiatic Barred Zone” established by the Immigration Act of 1917, the 1924 act banned any further immigration from all of Asia, in addition to placing strict quotas on immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. First-generation Asian immigrants already in the United States remained “aliens ineligible for citizenship” and thus had no path to naturalized citizenship. This law remained on the books until 1952. My great-grandparents, who immigrated to the United States from Japan around the turn of the 20th century, did not become naturalized American citizens until years after the end of World War II.

I outline these dates, in a rather abbreviated way, to show that there was an enormous amount of anti-Asian and specifically anti-Japanese sentiment in the years leading up to that infamous day, December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed. I outline them also to illustrate just a few of the ways that our legal system has, throughout history, attempted to set firm limits on who can come to the U.S. and subsequently have access to citizenship largely based on racist ideologies and capitalist anxiety. Indeed, in today’s contentious debates about illegal immigration and closing our borders, we can look directly back at the Immigration Act of 1924, as scholar Mae Ngai has noted, as the moment when the United States formally closed its borders for the first time. What does it say about our current immigration system once we understand its foundation was built on racist, exclusionary politics?

Understanding Japanese American incarceration as the result of years of racially-based exclusionist policies that reached a fever-pitch in combination with wartime hysteria makes frighteningly clear the myriad ways we have failed to learn from our past, but also demonstrates how, in many ways, our modern-day conceptions of things like citizenship, borders, and illegal immigration are often constructed from false histories. In facing these histories honestly, painful though the process may be, perhaps there is a glimmer of

hope to be found. In many ways, I think some of the most meaningful work of No-No Boy is sharing the stories of folks who set down roots and carved out spaces for themselves here, despite larger structures of racist exclusion. We choose to express these histories not in terms of policies and huge numbers, but through individuals. As I hope this album communicates, history expressed at the level of the individual can be a powerful tool in creating a better present.

In all, more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were uprooted and incarcerated during World War II, their only crime being the country from which their ancestors came. My grandmother, Misa Hatakeyama, was one such person, ripped out of her life as a college student in Los Angeles and sent to a concentration camp in Wyoming with her older brother and parents. In much of the writing that exists about this particular period in American history, it seems important to make clear that over two-thirds of the Japanese incarcerated were birthright American citizens, as if that lends a certain weight to the injustice of the camps. But highlighting the citizenship status of those second-generation Japanese Americans serves to erase the stories and the struggles of their parents and elders, who were imprisoned for equally racist reasons and who often suffered even sharper losses than their children. If we erase the stories of the issei, that first generation of Japanese in the U.S., then we are complicit in creating further silences within an archive that is already defined by many silences. My grandmother, like so many of her generation and like so many folks who deal with trauma as a result of racialized forms of violence, never talked about her time in camp. She left the experience behind and kept living. To honor her, to honor the many survivors of these camps that we have been fortunate enough to get to know, and, importantly, to honor the silences woven into this history, Julian and I tell as many of the stories as we can while leaving space for those silences, too.

Though its roots are deeply embedded in the histories of Japanese American incarceration, No-No Boy is much broader in scope. It is an effort to bring to light histories that are too often swept to the side, but that have much to teach us. We tell stories about communities of people putting down roots and claiming space, despite laws and attitudes hellbent on keeping them out. We tell stories about the more mundane moments in the past that, nonetheless, are history. We tell stories about incarceration, immigration, refugees, memory, first loves, suicide, and we look at the project of history itself. Ultimately, I think this is the goal – finding ways to broaden both the inheritors and the inheritance of American

history. And here, art and creative expression are crucial. By weaving together stories of refugees from southeast Asia with stories about various Chinatowns and the current genocide in Burma of the Rohingya, we try to show the messiness of histories of racialized violence without necessarily providing any closure. This is intentional. We don't try to provide any final resolution or healing commentary through the No-No Boy concert because, in these stories, resolution is not the end goal. Instead, we often leave our audiences, to quote our friend, the scholar Clare Croft, "sitting with a kind of melancholy," with a sense of the many ways that we, as a country and as a community of citizens, have failed to live up to an ideal in a way that is decidedly not temporary. It is an invitation into the discomfort of experiencing shame on behalf of a nation that has failed to learn from history. In this way, it aims to be a call to action.

Though the project of No-No Boy is vast and can seem overwhelming at times, I find clarity in the words of scholar and feminist writer Sara Ahmed, who writes about the cultural politics of emotion and the ways in which national shame is too often and too quickly converted to national pride. As Ahmed says, it is important to recognize that getting past feeling "bad" about something is not a measure of healing because to cover the bad feeling can also mean erasing the signs of injustice. Instead, a crucial part of healing should be exposing the wound to others, such that "the recovery is a form of exposure." This sense of recovery as exposure resonates, I think, with the work of No-No Boy. We tell stories of racialized others suffering violence at the hands of the state, not to evoke shame to be covered over into pride, but to work towards creating visible historical scars. Because, as Ahmed says:

a good scar is one that sticks out, a lumpy sign on the skin. It's not that the wound is exposed or that the skin is bleeding. But the scar is a sign of the injury: a good scar allows healing, it even covers over, but the covering always exposes the injury, reminding us of how it shapes the body. Our bodies have been shaped by their injuries; scars are traces of those injuries that persist in the healing or stitching of the present.¹

In a very small way, then, No-No Boy attempts to create good scars from the wounds of our history that are too easily forgotten or lost within the larger narrative. It may not be a perfect process, but it represents an important attempt to create a methodology that uses more affective means to shift the construction of the historical

¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), 202. x

narrative to the level of the individual. By including the stories of moments of national shame, not as a means to an end of national pride, but as injustices of the past that continue to act on the present, perhaps we can carve out space for a more honest and inclusive historical record.

No-No Boy is a response to the painful ways that our histories, be they the individual stories of our families or the broader national narrative from which many of us find ourselves still missing, continue to shape our present. This album, begun months before Julian and I first crossed paths, represents a celebration of the depth and reach of No-No Boy thus far, as well as a starting point for the work that we will continue to do, in collaboration with so many folks working in different arenas to make today better for as many people as possible. I am so proud of and inspired by the hard work and thought that Julian has infused into this album. I recognize the immense privilege and responsibility that we have, both in sharing these stories and in listening to the stories of the folks whose paths we cross. No-No Boy might be a small drop in an ocean of complicated and nuanced struggle, but the conversations we've had and the connections we've built through these songs represent, to me, an important step in healing some of the divides that seem to rule our lives.

And so, as we set out on our first national tour this fall, it is our hope that we can share these songs and stories – about finding love in a concentration camp, about Chinatowns across North America, about teenagers in Vietnam forming rock bands to play concerts for American GIs, about our friends figuring out their own Asian American identities – to shift the ways that we think about expressing history and to illuminate the ways in which stories of the past, and the past itself, continue to act on the present. I hope this album and these annotated lyrics make you think and ask questions, about your own story and about the stories of the people around you. I hope you choose to use those stories to shape the way you live – and that you make something to express them, so that others can experience them, too.

— Erin Aoyama, 2018

Introduction

This all began in Wyoming at a place called Heart Mountain. This whole big unruly school project/album cycle/teaching curriculum/dissertation.

I lived in that fine region for a little over three years, reading books and climbing mountains, and returning frequently to do research and teach at the university. Ironically, it was as a resident of this ultra-conservative and super white state where I first discovered any kind of Asian-American identity.

You see, I was born in Tennessee which was for a Vietnamese kid, kind of like growing up on an island. In Nashville in the last days of the pre-internet era, foodstuffs like Boba, Padthai and Pho were still weird and exotic and a full decade or two from middle Americana mainstream celebration. The great southern musical capital of my birth had only just gotten sushi when I was a kid. I had a good childhood. It was safe and my parents were well off — Dad was a last of the old cowboy hippie music execs on Music Row and Mom was a painter.

We didn't have much family around, which amongst the large extended southern clans of my schoolmates was noticeable. My Dad's people were Italian and Scandinavian turn of the century immigrants largely still in New England and my Mom's folks were mostly in France where they sought refuge after the Vietnam war. My Nashville family was a network of neighbors who I still consider blood, stretching the political spectrum. It is because of those people, along with the food, the landscape, and the music that I am forever a southerner and proud to be.

But the south was not proud of me. I envy the immigrant's kid in Tennessee today who gets to grow up in a world where they are removing the statue of KKK leader Forrest from our state capital building and who because of the internet and Nashville's cosmopolitan turn are learning more sides to the southern story and hopefully grappling with hard truths about the dark, bloody and twisted history of our land.

I had a good childhood, but reflecting back on it, which is largely the project of this album, I was isolated and self-loathing due to an inability to find a place more myself in the culture. Aside from the owners of the Golden Dragon buffet or the small Asian grocery off

Charlotte Pike, the only Asian people I saw until high school were my mom and kid brother. I realized early on that my face was marked perpetually foreign to the white and black kids I grew up with and I hated it. The constant “where are you from? No, where are you *really* from?” questions wore down any possibility for self-love or pride in my Vietnamese identity. Anything Asian was something I hid from. Childhood incidents of racism were not everyday but still remain vivid and scarring. I developed a toxic hatred for my Asian-ness developed to the point where I would feel pangs of embarrassment anytime I would hear an Asian accent or see an Asian actor, usually in a one-dimensional comedic role on TV or in movies. I had no heroes or stories of my own. I learned to detest the slant of my eyes for a very long time.

I eventually left my beloved Nashville and saw the world as a musician. Through triumphs, mistakes and perspective gained, I realized how much growing up as a young man in the late 20th century south had hindered my humanity. Though I always thought of myself as politically progressive, heavy reflection on my youthful behavior proved that claim shallow. Homophobia, misogyny and racism were ingrained in me as they were with many of my peers and bad habits proved slow to shed. To this day, even after a decade of conscious undoing, I still recognize gut reactions and interpersonal behaviors which indicate a reclamation project unfinished, a sentiment which in this crazy summer of 2020 is something a lot of Americans are reckoning with. If nothing else, No-No Boy is a project which asks us to investigate our history, acknowledge it, “scars” and all, and own it.

Transformation has been the guiding principal of my adult life. And much as we’re seeing in this historical moment, an understanding of the past is central to the work of change. This work started in earnest after my college band broke up and I turned to books for the first time in my life. First, I vagabonded classes at Vanderbilt University sitting in on undergraduate history and philosophy courses and living out of public libraries. Then I signed up for a graduate program in American Studies in the wide open spaces of Wyoming.

Out west, teachers and more skilled classmates illuminated concepts of race, gender, sexuality, and identity for me. They offered me lenses through which to view the world in greater detail focusing on history and self. As I realized how complicated and fucked up our past was, so too did I examine myself, eventually, finding my way back to that Asian kid growing up in Tennessee, abandoned long ago. Glimpsing gentler, kinder and more just ways of being, I

reached backwards to see if I could pull that part of myself out of the dark.

Traveling around Wyoming, spending summers and weekends climbing and camping, I visited places where Asian-Americans had worked on railroads, farmed, mined, been slaughtered, made homes, and enjoyed the marvelous sunsets the vast horizons of the American west still have to offer. I searched for the faint whispers of existence of Asian communities scattered around the west.

I found stories of people who looked like me doing miraculous and mundane things on the same land where I roamed. I chased the yellow threads in the American tapestry.

At Heart Mountain, I found a photograph of a jazz band. All Asian faces playing horns, putting on dances, behind barbed wire. This was the first time I saw *myself* in the past. I started interviewing some of these folks. I found family in one of them.

I began investigating all kinds of interesting stories. I started interviewing Asian-American musical peers and I started looking at my own life through this lens and engaging in a process of recovering myself through this work.

This first album *1942* is named for the year 120,000 Japanese Americans were sent off to concentration camps across the US. Heart Mountain was one of those camps. It is a place I return to often. To remember my friends who also spent three years in Wyoming in a very different experience. My visits to Heart Mountain and other spaces of Asian-American history spurred on my research, digging through archives, reading countless books and articles, and conducting interviews.

Eventually, I defaulted to my natural way of existing and began turning these stories into songs. Songs for my friends who were once locked up in Heart Mountain. Songs for the Chinese miners massacred in Rock Springs, Wyoming. Songs that restore that piece of myself which I ran from and denied as a boy. This is an album written for my twelve year old self. Singing to the realization that there have been worlds built by people who also had faces like yours and whose stories are worthy of song. Recovering the past to make whole the present.

— Julian Saporiti, 2020

NO-NO BOY

昭和17年

*Thirty years in this world
I wandered ten thousand miles,
By rivers, buried deep in grass,
In borderlands, where red dust flies.
Tasted drugs, still not Immortal...
Read books, wrote histories.
Now I'm back at Cold Mountain,
Head in the stream, cleanse my ears.*

- Han Shan

1. Pacific Fog

“Pacific Fog” is one of the oldest No-No Boy songs. I began writing it circa 2008, when I was still touring with the indie rock band The Young Republic. The song never found a home and spent the next decade collecting dust. During a move in 2017, I took the occasion to flip through a literal pile of unfinished songs in my archive. When I reread these lyrics, the intervening years of intellectual and geographic exploration imbued words like “pacific fog” and “Japanese parts, American wheels” with a new significance. I was inspired to rewrite the piece. The refrain “a child tangled in her sheets,” called to mind Ichiro the main character from John Okada’s novel *No-No Boy* from which this project takes its name. As I rewrote the last verse, Okada, the great under-appreciated author of Asian America and his eternally sad, broken and beautiful protagonist entered into the lyrics and the song became theirs.

Pacific Fog

Oh, oh, love of mine
Take me out dancing beneath the stars
Oh, Japanese parts
American wheels will take you further than far

Oh, Ichiro, so wild and tangled in your sheets
On every page, I thought, that's me.

Oh, oh, love of mine
Take me out swimming in Pacific fog¹
Oh, Canadian grass
and Mexican snow will both get you lost

Have you ever seen a child tangled in her sheets?
Have you ever thought, that's me?

Oh, oh, Ichiro,
Bury your mother, your runaway thoughts²
Oh, oh, *No-No Boy*,
Poor John Okada³ wrapped in Pacific fog

¹ This song was originally inspired by my first visit to the Pacific Northwest in 2005 on my band's first national tour. We were all 19 or 20. Not understanding the vastness of the United States, we had booked 12 gigs in 14 days, traversing 10,000 miles when all was said and done. I would point the reader to Robert Service's poem "The Tramps" to get an idea of the bleary eyed, delirious awesomeness of this first great journey of my life, which led me to the Pacific fog around the San Juan Islands.

"We tramped the road to Anywhere, the magic road to Anywhere,
The tragic road to Anywhere, such dear, dim years ago"

The next time I would navigate this area of the world, I was 32 years old and a member of the Japanese American Incarceration Mobile Workshop or JAIN Mob, a cohort of Brown University PhDs (and Kishi Bashi, a musician). Returning to the fog with a new set of collaborators, it was this trip which revived this song. As I floated for the second time off the waters of western Washington, exhaling at the end of our two week journey, I felt a weary exultation not unlike that first national tour in 2005, exploring worlds we had only heard or read about, and negotiating the complications of these worlds outside of our bubbles.

² *No-No Boy* the novel can be boiled down to the tragic story of a man torn between identities, loyalties, nationalities, all very much represented by his parents. His mother, a delusional, Japanese nationalist, refuses to believe her country has been defeated in WWII, right until her suicide. Ichiro's torment and confusion, his ripped-in-two-ness says so much about the hard-to-articulate stretching and breaking of so many people's experiences.

³ John Okada died in obscurity relative to the masterwork he gave not only to Asian-America but to all of English literature.

2. Boat People

“Boat People” comes from an archived Canadian Broadcast Corporation radio story I found from 1979 focusing on the harrowing journey of Dr. Tuan Tran, a Vietnamese refugee who eventually who resettled in Canada. Like hundreds of thousands of other Southeast Asians, the doctor fled Vietnam in a rickety fishing boat, thus branded one of the “boat people.”¹ The song’s narrator sings firmly from 2017. The straightforward true-to-life escape narrative is interspersed with my own present day numb/dumb moments of scrolling through a facebook feed filled with articles about Trump’s “Muslim Ban.” There is also reflection on my Mom’s Vietnamese refugee story.

Boat People

Forty years ago, the doctor left on a boat
Never seen the snow or felt it in his hand
Sail until you see dry land

I can’t get off the news, I can’t get off the floor
The “good folks” go inside when we need them most²
What do prayers do behind locked doors?

Tuan went back to rebuild, only to watch Saigon fall
He climbs up Mont Royal, makes a life in Montreal
Donated winter coats and Barbie dolls

I wrap myself in books. They’re talking bout this ban
I linger on bell hooks. She helps me to understand
Some of this ain’t new, no, ma’am.³

Fourteen hours by car, cargo trucks and cabs
Just to shake the cops, Mom had to stay back
A Chinese safe house and covered tracks

¹ Drainie, Bronwyn, “Pirates and sinking ships: One refugee’s story,” CBC, July 29, 1979. <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/pirates-and-sinking-ships-one-refugees-story>

² I remember an interviewee asking where all the “good, church going” folks were when they go loaded onto the trains and sent off to the camps. I think it was Yone Fukui in *Searchlight Serenade*.

³ There’s no article or piece by bell hooks in particular that I’m citing here, more of just a shout out because her work has provided a lot of thought and inspiration throughout my graduate work.

Eighteen meters long, two hundred bodies full
A simple compass and a map from a kid's geography book
Forget Ferdinand or Captain fuckin' Cook⁴

Bodies bobbing in the rough South China Sea⁵
Ran across a Thai pirate ship scavenging
Ripped the doctor from his kids, bleeding

Hours under gun, then tossed into the water
He swam back to his son, held on to his daughter
Drifting through the night...

As the daylight broke, a mountain in the dawn
Off the Malaysian coast, sweet Pulau Bidong⁶
Never cried so hard or so long

I can't get off the news. I can't get off my phone
My mother came here, too, forty years ago⁷
If you see somebody's cold, give 'em a coat

⁴ Ferdinand Magellan and James Cook, the first Europeans to reach the Philippines (1521) and Hawaii (1778), respectively, were both killed on their sites of "discovery." I find it interesting to wrap these "great navigators" into the narrative of a boat person, to think about the sea and death and troubled waters, perhaps to both lift the seafarers of the Pacific and, in this case, literally curse, the Europeans who were sometimes all I learned of Asia in history classes as a boy. I actually think Captain Cook had some cool qualities from reading his biographies.

⁵ Estimates range between 10%-70% of boat people died at sea.

⁶ Malay for Bidong Island where 40,000 refugees were crowded into the area a little bigger than a football field. Thompson, Larry Clinton. *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1982*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010, 156-160

⁷ My mother came to the US on a student visa in 1968 to study in Elizabethtown, PA. None of my family were boat people. The rest of my family took an overland route in 1976 to Thailand where, through connections supplied by my French war journalist uncle, they were able to flee to France by plane. In the time from when my Mom left and she saw her family again, her grandmother and father had died in Vietnam, and she didn't return until 2013.

3. Han Shan & Helen Keller: Cold Mountain

“Han Shan” was started during my last year at Berklee College of Music in 2007. It is a Boston song about two bougie college kids burning privilege at private universities and experiencing East Coast independence, sex, looks, booze and a grappling with maturity and identity, alone and together, for the first time. It was called “Helen Keller” then. I have no idea how Helen Keller originally arrived in this song. Like “Pacific Fog” I revived this piece for No-No Boy mainly because I liked the tune, but also, because I saw it as a chance to color in the whiteness of my work from this era. A few years back, I came to the realization that even though I was Asian American, and phenotypically, unmistakably so, my songs’ characters were almost all white. Curious. This version, now titled “Han Shan,” after one of my favorite poets, is a “yellow washing” of sorts, a recasting of the previously unmarked (white) college students with two Asian American kids wandering through Boston, finding a “sweet unease” in Chinatown, fucking, studying, listening to Mitski, and feeling things new. Some universal, young, first-time freedom stuff, but also speaking to a more specific Asian college kid thing.

Han Shan

Outside snow is falling
Han Shan’s voice is calling
Boots on Back Bay avenues

Winter city freeze out
Finals week I bleed out
All my last good tricks and charms

With Mitski’s¹ tunes I tarry
In Mass Ave library²
Climb Cold Mountain after noon
We got a lot to do
Really, what is there to do?

Sliding down Newbury³
Sugar Plummin’ fairies
Blowin’ kisses through their scarves
On the bridge over the pond⁴
A quiet that disarms

¹ Mitski is a Japanese-American indie rock artist who I had just corresponded with when I started rewriting these lyrics. The original musician in this line was Schubert.

² My college library

³ A fancy street in Back Bay Boston where Berklee kids used to busk, where my friends and I ate ice cream, and fancy people still shop.

⁴ The Public Gardens

A glance across the water
Last imperial daughter⁵
A trickster madame, not a thief
I keep my dress
both pressed and clean
Based on a best seller
Dance like Helen Keller
So new
Cold Mountain, see you soon⁶

Hoppin' on the Green Line
Dogearred, yellow highlights
Pre-Med major at BU

Trackin' snowy steps
And sippin' on some pep
In flasks of melted silver spoons
Eyes upon the moon
Really, what else can you do?

Get off at South Station
A good meal's like a vacation
Chinatown, a sweet unease
Find our food in Cantonese⁷
Jazz band in the cellar⁸
Dance like Helen Keller
True blue
Cold Mountain, see you soon

Finals come and go
Through winter city snow
Ambition keeps you on a hook

Hard bound Aristotle
Bowling pin glass bottles
Undress like a nervous crook
You give me such a look
God, I'll miss that look

A glance across the water
Last imperial Daughter
A trickster madame, not a thief
I keep my prose
both pressed and clean
Based on a best seller
Dance like Helen Keller⁹
So new

⁵ Original line: "Last Napoleon daughter"

⁶ Han Shan means Cold Mountain.

⁷ This line was inspired by two Chinese American friends of mine: Emily Huo, a Wellesley student I knew while I was at Berklee, who was maybe the first Asian American friend I made, and Christal Chiu, who works for a non-profit in Seattle. At two dim sum meals 14 years apart, they both ordered our food in Cantonese in Boston's Chinatown.

⁸ A nod to the Chop Suey circuit, the string of Chinese American night clubs in the early 20th century.

⁹ Long after writing the line "dance like Helen Keller" to the page, I googled "Helen Keller Dancing" and found the most amazing video of Helen in 1954 visiting the Martha Graham dance studio, touching the dancers, feeling the mouth of a soprano, the vibrations of the room and a timpani. "That is beautiful," she remarked, "it is like my daily prayers." It's a penetrating, emotional clip. It's not unlike the feelings I get thinking of Han Shan, the mad poet climbing up cliffs to paint his poetry on mountains in 8th century China. As a poet who has climbed many cliffs, I know the feeling of newness and triumph and humility in both pursuits — the reader may choose to turn to Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* for a wonderful articulation of this mountain climbing poet thing.

4. Disposable Youth

My years in Wyoming directly inspired a handful of No-No Boy songs. The land, the weather, small town quotidian experiences as a grad student, climber, community member, middling boyfriend, musician, teacher, minority were foundational for constructing the world in which several of these songs are set.

I love Wyoming. I never felt better than when I was climbing with Tim and Zach at Vedauwoo, getting bloody and tired and then speeding back to class at UW for a grad seminar. It changed me. It grew me. I also remember rare but cutting moments of racism. I still think of this one afternoon downtown, not even close to dark, when a muscular, thick necked white dude just came at me shaking a fist and yelling in fake Chinese til I left this bar. This was the same bar where Matt Shepard went the night he was murdered. This incident was one of the few violent incidents I encountered out west but I still remember my quite liberal girlfriend doing this kind of cutesy palms together Asian-y dance with her friend which was dumb and annoying, or friends making comments with little self-awareness. These things aren't too big of a deal but they can pile up.

As I've said, Wyoming awakened this project. I fell deeply into discovery, uncovering the lives lived at Heart Mountain during WWII and of the Chinese miners who were massacred in Rock Springs in 1885. I made pilgrimages to these places. I also drew a lot from the writings of my friends Nina and LuLing and their stories of Asians out west.

"Disposable Youth" is a simple song. There's no specific scholarship or history behind it. Mostly, I wrote it after a hazy afternoon in a friend's backyard, playing lawn games, drinking, hearing some good stories, enjoying the few perfect weeks of the stunted Wyoming summer. The space and slowness of my years in Wyoming allowed me to appreciate ephemeral moments—the pieces of life which define it, but often slip through historian's fingers... There is a very broadly "American" thing happening here, a backyard hang. Archival photos of immigrant families having picnics or barbecues, as well as images from Nina's book *Cowboys and East Indians* floated to mind. There is a touch of my southern lineage in the lyrics "fireflies... mason jar... peach pie," and I guess, to that point, this is an imagining of what it would have been like to be ever experience a Memorial Day bbq with people who looked like me, to enter into those archival photos I'd found.

Disposable Youth¹

Disposable you
Disposable me
Disposable hearts
Indestructible teens

A grin on the grass
Polish horseshoes and white trash croquet
From your lawn chair reign

Coleman cooler of ice
Bobbing for PBR
Modelos, light headed
Man, she's off of the charts

Undeniable parts
Sharp wit, dark eyes and runner's legs
A mouth like New Year's Day

Not a moment to waste
Leave that for the food
It's life that we taste
And it's life that tastes good

Disposable youth
Irrepressible hands long his waist
God, this band is great

Disposable youth
Caught like fireflies
In this mason jar afternoon
An single bite a la mode peach pie

Disposable you
Disposable me
Fearless child rolling up her sleeves

¹ About the title: I have had a few thoughts come to mind singing these words, 1.) Mike Masaoka's idea for an all-Japanese American suicide squad to prove Japanese American loyalty in WWII 2.) Folks growing up in refugee, internment or detention camps 3.) Poor folks in America whether its white kids in Wyoming or Cambodian kids in the park by my house in Providence. It seems like with our views on social welfare and healthcare in the USA, the environment, warehouse working conditions, education, gun control, unnecessary military conflicts, what are many of us, if not disposable to some people?

5. Lam Thi Dep

This song was written after reading Yen Le Espiritu's *Body Counts* and Viet Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. These works suggest how reductive and insufficient the term "refugee" can be.

Lam Thi Dep was a female Viet Cong soldier immortalized in a striking photograph, poised folk warrior, holding an American machine gun. In this song, she is jumbled up alongside a fictional south Vietnamese general and a musical theater loving child of boat people. We see these individual's USA bound post-war fates working in bakeries, drinking cheap beer, doing nails, saving money to visit Broadway, voting Republican. This informed but imagined micro-diaspora points to the diverse lives of "refugees" which Espiritu and Nguyen highlight through their writing.

The last verse gets a bit jargon-y and is one of the more prickly passages. Read Espiritu chapter 1 and then, if you ever visit Providence, try to catch a bit of the "oppression olympics" of which the students at Brown university hold daily contests.

The first verse is all I've been able to write of a beautiful diary entry my aunt gave me, written in French, as she watched the North Vietnamese descend upon Saigon in 1975, her world, like millions of others', finally collapsing.

Lam Thi Dep

Shame on the southern face
Nicole saw the flags of uncle Ho¹
Sweep the streets she used to know
Military issued boots and uniforms
Shed like unfit skin on the pavement

Twice a widow
Clutching an unreliable M16
Stolen off dead infantry²
Lam Thi Dep did you make it out?
Are you doing Becky's nails in orange
county?

¹ Nickname of Ho Chi Minh, liberator of Vietnam

² My collaborator Yoon Shim pointed out that this weapon may have been purchased by the North and issued to Lam Thi Dep, but weapons were often take from dead Americans and South Vietnamese.

General Tran,³ he votes republican⁴
His father was a fisherman
He's a pastry chef at Le Bec Fin⁵
We both get drunk on Miller beer
We say, "salut," instead of "cheers"

Born feeling wrong⁶
I sing my secrets in a song
Too unfamiliar to belong
Anywhere on either side
I took the train to 59th
Felt guilty as I stood in line
Don't let this get back to Mom
But I know every word to Miss Saigon⁷

Washed up in the Ivy League
Microaggressed, hear the precious sing
with suffering these "refugees"
in seminars, on bowling greens
with detached look-at-me empathy
what does "refugee" really mean
besides villainizing cold war enemies
and re-ascribing validity
to the nation state?
Meanwhile, displaced peoples seek
a way to make the best of things
and run away from real suffering
which we employ as currency
against doctoral imposter anxiety
Look, I just want a house and a
diamond ring⁸
Get off it, or pick up a god damn rifle⁹
There's no revolution
at Brown University
No, not for Lam or Tran
or Nicole or me

³ General Tran is largely based on the South Vietnamese military exile characters of *The Sympathizer*, a delusional, comic and tragic bunch plotting to take back the homeland. I imagine my general eventually making his way to Houston, mellowing out, eating Viet-Cajun food, and developing a drinking problem.

⁴ 32% of Vietnamese Americans voted for Trump in 2016. Wang, Hansi Lo, "Trump Lost More Of The Asian-American Vote Than The National Exit Polls Showed," 4/18/2017, npr.org

⁵ French-Vietnamese patisserie in Houston.

⁶ This character is a complete work of fiction. A queer kid. Maybe from Jersey? Maybe his mom teaches at Princeton, or maybe he's from NoVA in that big Viet community down there where my Aunt Mai Ti lives.

⁷ For many Asian-American academics and theater folks, *Miss Saigon* is problematic for a number of reasons, including orientalism, misogyny, exoticization, and a whitewashing casting controversy. The reader may want to see David Henry Wang's *Yellowface*, for a thoughtful and invested take. This character is aware of this controversy, but really loves the songs.

⁸ Paraphrasing a funny outburst from my professor Sandy Zipp who, fed up with a seminar discussion in which our class discussion veered into severe heteronormative capitalism bashing without much actual critique of the reading for that week, Sandy, said, "look I'm a white guy with a house and job. I'm sorry! What the fuck do you want me to do about it?"

⁹ There is a militant, radical chic which many "activist scholars" affect, especially in American Studies. It's 99.9% talk. I do not condone violence or guns for political means. My collaborator Diego, an Afro-Cuban-Chinese American often jokes about militia training in the hills of Massachusetts. We bullshit as faux radicals but we are suburban Nashville boys at heart talking big talk in the Ivy League and going to conferences held in hotel ballrooms. #imposters

6. Instructions To All Persons

The title of this song is a direct quotation of an infamous poster plastered up and down the west coast in the spring of '42. It instructed all Japanese Americans to report to assembly centers so they could eventually be moved to concentration camps across the US. One of the main ideas behind this work is to break down big, unprocess-able numbers like these 120,000 incarcerated Japanese-Americans hastily sent to these camps, to unfocus the large narratives and black and white arguments around which we have constructed history and community legacies, and instead, refocus on individuals, as a way in for the listener and student. The three verses of this song are taken directly from three conversations I had with Sachi Kuwatani, Tats Nagase, and Roy and Miriam Hatamiya, while kicking around San Francisco in early 2016, all of whom were children or teenagers in the camps.

Instructions To All Persons

Instructions to all persons of Japanese...
Instructions to all persons of Japanese ancestry

I think of my friend Sachi, now, Mrs. Kuwatani¹
Telling me stories in the old folks home
Like the time she was a little girl
and climbed above the rest of the world
Scaled the tower at the Santa Anita racetrack²
Where not even the boys dared go
And she felt good for a moment or so...

¹ Sachi and I sat in the apartment she shared with her husband in the retirement home in San Francisco's Japantown. She kept feeding me pretzels and ginger ale. I had originally met Sachi hanging out with a group of older ladies who played Mahjong everyday at the Japanese Cultural and Community Center. I was introduced to this group of women by Denise Teraoka, the daughter of Joy Teraoka, a friend who lives in Hawaii and who sang with the George Igawa Orchestra at Heart Mountain during WWII.

² In actuality, Sachi scaled the tower overlooking the Tanforan race track outside San Francisco. Santa Anita, another assembly center fit better rhythmically. I often will take stories from one camp and place them in another. She was eventually sent to Topaz, where many folks from San Francisco were incarcerated during the war.

I think of my friend Tats³
fishing scorpions from the hot
Colorado River Indian land⁴
Would be Casanova
Walking three girls home from the dance
Well after midnight
Singing harmonies, til one by one they'd leave
and leave Tats to stroll back in the moonlight
Singing ballads to the stars all his own
And he felt good for moment or so...

Instructions to all persons of Japanese...

I think of my friend Roy⁵, a farm kid, teenage boy
Mr. Tanaka inviting him to join the dance band
In a place called Tule Lake,⁶ then, later on at Amache
He found a group of kids to find trouble with
Some little slice of living
Through a clerical error, his friends and him
got a bunkhouse to themselves, they called the "Loafers Inn"⁷
Playing cards and telling jokes
They felt good for a moment or so...

³ Tats gave me a card which says "former casino hustler," which I think says a lot about him. He is a raconteur. We watched a recent PBS documentary on the camps in his apartment, which is not far from Sachi's. He did a running commentary which was really interesting. One of the major concerns I have to grapple with when speaking to old folks about their memories of camp is how much of what they are telling you are their own acute recollections from 75 years ago, and how much of it is from books, documentaries, or what the culture at large and the JA community has decided on as their narrative?

⁴ Poston, Arizona concentration camp

⁵ Roy and his wife Miriam drove in from Yuba City to speak with me. Unlike Tats and Sachi who I had met kicking around Japantown, I had been corresponding with Roy for a while via email and letters because he was a musician in the camps who I had come across in the archives.

⁶ On this same research trip, I was at a rock climbing gym in the Mission when a hapa woman told me she thought she knew someone who had had an uncle who played trumpet in the camps.

A few days later, after several phone calls and emails to family members, I was on my way to Sacramento to visit with Mickey Tanaka. Mickey was 101 years old, had suffered a stroke a decade before and was home bound. But he was sharp and we dug through his memories of being a musicians in the 30s in Sacramento and then leading the Starlighters, a jazz band he formed at the Tule Lake concentration camp. He told me that, unlike most of the jazz bands that formed throughout the camps, his band had to rehearse in a field and was mostly comprised of high school kids. The younger kids, eager to just be a part of the group, would hold up the sheet music in lieu of music stands. Before Tule Lake became the segregation camp for disloyal "no-no boys," Roy was a member of Mickey's band. Mickey remembered him.

⁷ After Roy and his family moved to the Amache, Colorado camp, one of his friends was assigned an entire barrack room to himself and this became their clubhouse.

7. Ogie / Naoko

“Ogie / Naoko” was written after reading Melody Miyamoto Walters book *In Love and War: The World War II Love Letters of a Nisei Couple*. The book is a collection of correspondence between Walters’ grandparents Naoko and Yoshiharu (“Ogie”), two Japanese Americans who lived in Hawaii during the war. Because they made up such a large percentage of the work force, the vast majority of Japanese Americans in Hawaii were not sent to camps. But, because the territory was under martial law, travel was heavily restricted and Walters’ grandparents were rarely able to see each other. Their letters offer an interesting look at the islands during the war through the eyes of two very different Japanese Americans.

The book itself is not of great artistic quality, but the primary sources collected make for a rich text. Walters, understandably, sugar coats things in her analysis. She is not critical of the manipulative, misogynist sentiments which frequently creep into Yoshiharu’s letters, nor does she dig into and address the problem’s which arise in situations where her grandmother’s sense of duty demands that she make herself socially available to the hoards of white servicemen flooding into Hawaii: dancing, dating, and (though not explicitly stated) sex as patriotism. It is a toothless but satisfying love story, not a bad thing and important in remembering the human players underneath this military and political history. This song, then, is true to this Walters’ intent, even if the “truth” could have produced something less romantic but perhaps more interesting.

Ogie / Naoko

We have but eternity, let's waste it together
Dress me in sunlight and benevolent tethers
Swing on the radio, a kiss in the hallway
Ask me, how long I'll love you
The answer, always
Pen touches paper and all the world's right
Or, as right as it could be, tonight

Ogie, Naoko
Hearts in airmailed envelopes
Ogie, oh
Naoko!

They fell in love through a war, fished flames from their breasts
The girl was a poet, the boy did his best¹
To float in between islands on black ink and sentiment

As the sage recommends, firm footing as friends
A tiptoe quotidian so close to the edge
of the world, who knows, this could happen again
and where lay our loyalties, then?
to each other of course, til the end

Ogie, Naoko
Hearts in airmailed envelopes
Ogie, oh
Naoko!

Pen touches paper and all the world's right
Or, as right as it could be, tonight

Ogie, Naoko
Hearts in airmailed envelopes
Ogie, oh
Naoko!

¹ Naoko came from a middle class background while Yoshiharu was raised in a plantation family and wrote/spoke in a pidgin English, whereas Naoko's English was more "standard."

8. Heart Mountain

Started in Wyoming, fleshed out in San Francisco, finished in Providence, this song comes from a story told by my friend Alice about her mom Jane Fumiye Hara who was incarcerated with her family in the camp at Tule Lake, CA.

It is often told that the camps undermined family structures and loosened the bond between first generation Issei and their Nisei children. This is largely true, but the camp experience affected each family and person differently. In Alice's mom's case, her parents were strict and forbade her to date. Despite the parental decree, Jane had a secret boyfriend. Though the couple could not acknowledge their romance in public, there was one space where they were able to show affection. After meals, they took to their jobs washing dishes in the mess hall and, standing beside each other, held hands beneath the soapy water.

"Heart Mountain's" lyrical style was inspired by the poetry, dramas, and libraries of the camps. I picture the narrator a college sophomore whose degree in English was interrupted by the war. An earnest, green poet who confuses bombast for quality but shows a passion for the medium in his verbose Anne of Green Gables-esque outbursts.

Heart Mountain

Good years on a mountain, primrose¹ on the sill
Good years on a mountain, in the house that we build

Some star-crossed, outlaw love in the movies is cool
But over and over, our hearts are rapped by the rules
Dream, do not do, don't dare drift from the pew
No serpent slain final curtain, no Byronic² revue
Hush hun, tell no one, this one's for you
Hush hun and hold it, trust it as true

Born to western mountains, three states from my hills
A long decade onward, a great gap to fill
Of travel and reference, yet I imagine us still
Old queens in Okinawa,³ springs of sonnets fulfilled
Hush hun and hold on, a daydream must do
Hush hun and hold it, trust it as true

From my lover's brass bed, I catch alabaster snow
While you cross the bay bridge, with a boy who's right to boast

¹ A beloved English garden flower, subspecies in Japan and the US. A harbinger of spring.

² Characteristic of the work of Lord Byron

³ A nod to the queer folks in the camps. A nod to the fact that these immigrants came from many different parts of the islands now known as Japan.

of his companion's classic beauty, like the Agave in bloom,⁴
hills of Kurinji flowers⁵ where infinity's consumed
Hush hun and hold on, like your teenage tattoo
or your beautiful belly, or your perfect crooked tooth
Your language is my language, wet lips in laundry rooms
Hush hun and hold on, daydreams must do

Good years on a mountain, with so much love that it spills
and runs down in rivers past the house that we build
We'll sail down those rivers through my soft sunburnt hills
in a boat brimmed with books, capes of music, cups filled
Oh, teach me faith over fear, hear my heart as she thrills
and bellows and echoes with unconquerable will
Writing postcards from every province, picking primrose for the sill
Good years on a mountain in the house that we build
Good years on a mountain in the house that we build⁶

⁴ *Agave Americana* or the century plant blooms once in its ten to thirty year life and then dies

⁵ An Indian bush whose blue flower bloom once every dozen years

⁶ Two other camps besides Heart Mountain, Manzanar and Tule Lake, also have mountains nearby which add distinction to old photos, making them more easily identifiable in archival photos. Because of these mountains, they are striking places to visit. At Tule Lake the incarcerated erected a wooden cross on the highest peak. For some mountains symbolized something lofty, or beyond, like the landscape articulating a dream.

When I spoke to Ray Uno, the first Asian American judge in Utah, he told me about the time he snuck out of camp with a friend from his scout troop and made a day long 17 mile round trip up to the top of Heart Mountain and back. They ran out of water almost immediately, killed two rattlesnakes, and mistook the search party at the edge of the camp for a welcoming party as they finally returned at dusk. At the 2017 Heart Mountain pilgrimage, I had to carry a 12 year old kid up the last stretch of this hike. I thought of Ray. The view was amazing.

At Manzanar, on the JAIN Mob trip, my friend K was struck by the mountains and didn't quite know what to make of the immense beauty of such a tragic place. A week and a half later, on Bainbridge Island, we were speaking to Kay Sakai Nakao who had been incarcerated at Manzanar. She told us the most interesting stories, including how young couples would take blankets out towards the mountains and hook up in the desert, lighting a sea of glowing lanterns. K. Ishibashi asked Kay Nakao how she felt when she was sent there, the scenery being so beautiful. She said it was only in the 1980s, when she returned, that she could recognize the beauty of the land. While she was incarcerated as a woman in her early 20s, the beauty was muted by the anger and confusion she felt. She told us a story about walking by a barrack where a kindergarten class was reciting the pledge of allegiance and how sad that made her.

There is a collection of photographs of issei hiking around Seattle, up Mt. Rainier, in the 1920s. It is inspiring to see these immigrants scaling a mountain. It is also illustrative of how much the incarceration took from an entire group of people, removed from homes, schools, off of mountain tops, and sent to camp.

9. Two Candles In The Dark

I originally wrote this song about dancing with an ex-girlfriend at a music hour in an old folks home in Laramie. The clumsy waltz, boot color and title are all that remain from the original draft. I repurposed the song in 2017 after visiting the root cellar at Heart Mountain. I felt some kind of inspiration standing in that impressively large, crumbling structure about the size of a football field which the incarcerated dug out themselves to store vegetables. I wanted to set a story there, in that room. Two kids dancing in the dark.

As I rewrote the lyrics, I poured over copies of the *Heart Mountain Sentinel*, the newspaper published in the camp, and listened back to tall tales I had recorded of men who were boys in the camp. I looked at old photos from the museum archive. With guitar in hand, I sat with all these glimpses of the camp, looking for small actions, characters and feelings, and wrote this song.

The song's hero is a pretty bad ass young woman like when Olivia Newton John wears black at the end of *Grease* but you know, Japanese and in a concentration camp, who guides a nervous narrator, a farm kid, on a trip around the camp and beyond the barbed wire. She is his Virgil. He is probably my friend Jim Mizuta who was a teenager at Heart Mountain. The pair finds a little time to exist underground in this root cellar. Past the sounds of the issei men singing Japanese songs in the bathroom, past the ice skaters, past boredom, lighting a little fire, keeping sadness at bay, they sway in the dark like a Springsteen song.

Two Candles In The Dark

Don't it feel like a movie, teaching this girl how to waltz
Left feet, she might have three, but she sure feels nice in my arms
Old folks sing an old song,¹ play in the agreed upon key
My eyes are stuck on her, her eyes don't leave her feet

This girl, no class ring,² maybe this is more than a lark
Brown boots, a dirt floor, we're dancing like two candles in the dark

Pretty outlaw call a quarter past, light knuckles on a barrack door
She got a brother down in Topaz, I saw that name once in a jewelry store
Wind around past the skaters and pond,³ looking for a cut in the wire
She's got a key to the cellar door,
I don't ask questions, man, just stand there inspired⁴

This girl, gets why, I miss the garden at the Golden Gate Park
Young blood and old songs, we're dancing like two candles in the dark

I tell ya, man, it's like some movie and she's just tailor made for the part
Lamps licking the roof beams, she's got good looking down to an art
Hear the old folks sing them old songs, the background just fades away
Our coffee can fire's almost gone, she says, "I gotta get out of this place"

This girl, a pin point, that moment ya feel a spark
Brown boots, a dirt floor, we're dancing like two candles in the dark
Dancing like two candles in the dark
Dancing like two candles in the dark

¹ Shig Yabu, one of the Nisei boys who have come to be a dominant voice in shaping the narrative and memories surrounding the Heart Mountain camp experience, sat me down for about three hours and told me a wonderful smattering of truth, lies and fantasies from his time in camp and after. One was remembering hearing Issei men singing around the stove in the bathrooms during the winter.

² There are many stories of high school and college seniors not being able to walk at their graduations in the spring of '42 because they were sent off to assembly centers and later to the camps.

³ There is documentation of crude ice rinks being constructed at most of the camps which had cold winters. Skates would be ordered from the Sears Roebuck catalog.

⁴ There is no documentation of this scene actually happening, a dance in the root cellar, but when Erin and I visited in October 2017, our friend Dakota, who runs the museum at Heart Mountain, said it wouldn't have been surprising if something similar had happened. After the first year of camp, the guards relaxed and kids snuck out regularly, like Ray Uno and his friend. After our concert in the original barrack on site during that same trip, a local white resident told us that him and his buddies used to hang out there when they were high schoolers after the camp closed.

10. Dragon Park

This song, originally titled “Southern Stare,” is a reflection on growing up in Tennessee. For me, even today, there is often an underlying discomfort that bubbles up when I pull into a rural gas station. This reaction stems from decades of weird, menacing looks and awkward encounters filling up my tank in rural TN. I can’t really shake this gas station paranoia. It’s built up and produced an edge. It’s unfortunate.

In 1990, when I was just five years old, I stood in the entry way of the Walmart off Charlotte Pike. This little kid, blond haired, blue eyed, out of nowhere, slanted his eyes at me and began shouting fake Chinese right to my face. I was standing next to my mother. The boy’s father was standing right beside him. The adults said nothing.

Maybe a decade after that, I remember sitting in the back seat of my mom’s white Volvo station wagon on White Bridge Road. It was a warm day and the windows were rolled down. A group of high school boys pulled up beside us and started violently screaming at my mother. They said horrible, racist and sexist things. Four mouths, wide open, leaning out their windows, hurling insults, laughing hatred, just having fun.

Dragon Park is a real, beloved place in Nashville. My friends and I used to play there. I never realized it at the time, probably because I tried to distance myself from *anything* Asian, but we were climbing all over this bad ass mosaic Asian dragon right in the middle of Nashville. Be the dragon, no matter where you are. Something to keep in mind the next time I fill up the tank down south.

Dragon Park

Je chante en français¹

Italian last name²

Eyes like the king of old Siam³

Broken in half

A colonial raft, splinters and laughs

Like my Japanese friend who fronts a country band⁴

¹ My mother and I communicate mostly in French, not English or Vietnamese. #imperialism

² My Dad is Italian American mixed with some Swedish and northern European descent.

³ I now find the ancient history of Southeast Asia really cool. I have complicated memories of watching *The King and I* in middle school.

⁴ Mari Nagatomi is a country musician from Japan and now a scholar studying the history of country music in Japan. When I was a kid, my Dad, a record company exec, would play demos of people trying to “make it” in Nashville. I distinctly remember listening to a tape of a man singing with a really heavy Japanese accent. We made fun of it.

I feel washed out
Punched in the mouth, private school playgrounds
White knuckled, blue-eyed barbarians⁵

I know that southern stare
Not just back home but everywhere

Forget me not
Strolling round Angkor Wat,⁶
Ruins saved and cleaned by gloved French hands

Sweet Twinkie, confused
Old missionary blues
Kung fu barbie, yellow fever tan⁷

Confederate flags, jasmine ice tea
The Golden Buffet in downtown Pulaski⁸
Sashimi plate, magnolia leaves
At old Dragon Park, sit and watch ‘em do Tai Chi⁹

Je connais ce regard qui tue
Non seulement dans le sud mais partout

Je chante en français
Un nom italien
Les yeux comme le roi du Siam

⁵ “Barbarians,” translated from Chinese, appears in several of the anonymous poems scratched into the walls of the Angel Island Immigration facility where thousands of Asian, mostly Chinese, immigrants were detained, often indefinitely and medically experimented on in disturbing inhumane ways.

⁶ When I went with my mom back to Vietnam in 2013, the first time she’d ever gone back, we took a few days to visit the temples at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. It was a deeply moving experience, and is the symbol of an incredibly complicated, tragic, and resilient country.

⁷ My friend Christal sent me a college photo where she has dyed blonde hair and is wearing an American flag tank top flashing double peace signs. This is her verse.

⁸ In the 80s my parents were on a road trip and passed a sign that said “Pulaski, TN: Home of the KKK.” My dad tried to get my mom to pose in front of the sign.

⁹ Fannie Mae Dees Park, or “Dragon Park” in Nashville is home to a Chinese American led group that does Tai Chi on the weekends.

11. Little Saigon

This is a pastoral song. It's a fantasy. Actual Little Saigons scattered around the diaspora, are, in the US at least, mostly just malls, concrete consumerism with some great food and some confused South Vietnamese refugee politics. My Little Saigon does not exist, except in this song.

Little Saigon

I heard about a place called Little Saigon
Everybody's got my face, so, mine won't have to grow so long
Palm trees, a terrace seat, a café where I belong
Oh, I think I'd like to go to this place, Little Saigon

One day I'd like to go to a place called Little Saigon
Buy shoes in a little shop and silks from Vietnam
Take lessons on the Đàn bầu¹ and play an old folk song
Oh, I think I'd like to go to a place called Little Saigon

Un jour, je vais aller à Little Saigon
J'enverrai une lettre en Français à ma maman
"C'est pas Saigon, maman, mais je serais content longtemps."
Un jour, je voudrais aller à Little Saigon

One day, I'm gonna go to a place called Little Saigon
Listen to the CBC Band² loud with my headphones on
Walk around the indoor mall where the language sounds like song³
Oh, I think I'd like to go to a place called Little Saigon
Oh, I think I'd like to go to this place, Little Saigon.

¹ A Vietnamese monochord instrument which I became obsessed with while visiting.

² Perhaps the best of the South Vietnamese rock bands which formed when the US occupied Saigon and elsewhere. They have two amazing tracks on the *Saigon Rock and Soul* compilation.

³ Vietnamese is a tonal language, so the pitch of each word is very important to its meaning. I have no control over this language. My mother has literally spent five full minutes correcting my mispronunciation of "Phở."

Acknowledgements

I never thought I would release another album. I certainly did not foresee completing a doctorate at Brown University by turning in a multi-disc collection of songs. *1942* is the first offering from this much larger project, and at this moment, it is nice to take pause and appreciate the occasion and shout out the people who have helped bring my songs to life.

I have to first and foremost thank Erin Aoyama. She sang harmony on seven of these recordings and although we have gone our separate ways, she will always be a very important part of this project. In 2018, Erin traveled the country by my side, singing my songs, helping me tell stories, start conversations, answer questions, find new questions and conduct research. She also allowed me to think through her personal connection to these songs as a legacy of Heart Mountain and pay tribute to her grandmother Misa Hatakeyama who served as a bit of a guiding light during our time together.

Emilia Halvorsen, Noah Choi, and Michelle Bazile sang, played piano and bass respectively back on the first recordings I made for this project in the spring of 2017. They were the first musicians I collaborated with and laid the foundation for this whole thing spending many hours rehearsing some of these early songs. This little ensemble gave me confidence to really pursue these songs and record them and see what they might do.

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Tessa Sacramone filled out some beautiful violin parts.

Dan Lipsitz supplied brass and wind work, as always.

Kishi Bashi played violin and made other sounds on several songs.

Perhaps, most importantly, I need to thank all of the people who have been kind enough to share their stories with me as I’ve been conducting research and investigating my own past. My family, my mother and her sister, especially. I want to thank all of the folks who suffered through the Japanese-American Incarceration camps and have shared what they went through but especially Joy Teraoka who has become like a grandmother to me over the years of emails and finally in 2018, our time in Hawaii visiting and playing music. And, I definitely want to thank all of the people who

during Q & As or after shows have shared their family experiences with us, who found something of their own stories in these songs and have let us have a glimpse of their experiences.

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Thank you for listening.

Further Reading

Japanese American Incarceration

No-No Boy, John Okada

A Tragedy of Democracy, Greg Robinson

Citizen 13660, Miné Okubo

Buddha In The Attic, Julie Otsuka

Vietnamese Refugees

The Best We Could Do, Thi Bui

The Sympathizer, Viet Nguyen

Body Counts, Yen Le Espiritu

Asian America

Yell-OH! Girls, Vickie Nam

Cowboys and East Indians, Nina McConigley

Impossible Subjects, Mae Ngai

At America's Gates, Erika Lee

Immigrant Acts, Lisa Lowe

Empire In Southeast Asia

A Taste of Empire, Jovanni Sy

Essays

"Crying In H-Mart," Michelle Zuaner

"Wild, Wild East," Luling Osofsky

