MUSIC MAKING AS ASSIMILATION:
THE PRACTICE OF GROUP LISTENING

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ABSTRACT

Group Listening is a collaborative musical performance practice that I organized and led from 2017 to 2021 with a group of musicians under the name Ensemble Consensus. Group Listening was the conceptual term I coined to be referenced by Ensemble Consensus members as a mutually understood, overarching framework when designing and discussing our own projects. Notably, Ensemble Consensus was a group dedicated solely to Group Listening projects.

At its core, Group Listening is a creative methodology for investigating various relationship dynamics via iterative activities that necessitate collective authorship, participation, and improvisation. Specifically, every Group Listening project has resulted in Ensemble Consensus members co-writing text-based guidelines that outline the ways we should relate to one another and our creative tools. These guidelines determined how we rehearsed, rather than what we played. Thus, our various public performances and offerings ended up looking, sounding, and feeling like rehearsals. With each project, Ensemble Consensus aimed to imagine different ways of facilitating social interaction to deepen our creative capacity for collaborative music making.

Understanding Group Listening necessitates understanding the social circumstances that initiated the performance practice. Group Listening and Ensemble Consensus came about as a reaction to my lived experiences with assimilation and rootlessness. My migratory background as a Seoul-born, Shanghai-raised artist currently based in New York informs my understanding of music as a social activity, where explicit and implicit etiquettes and rules of collaboration inform how people engage with one another socially and musically.

Analyses of a portfolio of projects undertaken by Ensemble Consensus demonstrate how Group Listening treats music making as an assimilatory process that can manufacture norms and manipulate relationship dynamics in specific ways, parallel to the experience of

cultural assimilation. In doing so, I advocate for the acceptance of rootlessness as a meaningful condition that encourages multiplicity and fluidity within notions of selfhood and identity. Accepting rootlessness at the personal and interpersonal level illuminates how it can be applied at the cultural level. In this project, I apply the connections between rootlessness, assimilation, and Group Listening to the contemporary cultural interpretations of Koreanness. In so doing, I situate the musical practice within the history of my place of birth and clarify the origins of my desire to legitimize rootlessness and assimilatory practices like Group Listening.

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Assimilation and Music

I remember how I felt when being taught how to behave appropriately during the

school band class's rehearsals. I have had similar feelings many times since, when

experiencing a choir rehearsal, free improvisation jam session, band practice for a cover

band, or chamber orchestra rehearsal as the composer for the first time. That first

experience is an overwhelming influx of information: I notice patterns of who is

communicating what and when, how people are communicating with one another, how and

when the musical playing happens, how music is represented and coordinated, and how

musical play changes over the course of the rehearsal. The first rehearsal in a new context

stimulates a heightened sense of awareness that, with time and regularity, relaxes into

familiarity. I have also felt this same type of tension and release every time I moved to a

new country or found myself a newcomer of any social group, which I experienced often as

a Korean emigrant. I notice social patterns and ask myself similar questions around

cadences of communication, how and when various types of interactions happen, and how

relationship dynamics unfold and evolve. Within the context of cultural or social migration,

this process is commonly understood as assimilation.

Drawing the parallels between my personal experiences acclimating to a new musical

situation and a new cultural situation is how I came to understand music as a form of

assimilation, and music making as an assimilatory process. Assimilation is a contested term

and concept. It has primarily been used in the field of sociology and has rightfully

undergone scrutiny and critique, especially as assimilation has been utilized in reference to

genocidal physical violence, political domination, and cultural erasure and homogenization.[1]

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[1] In Chapter 2, I more fully explain the definition and justify the usage of assimilation as a term in
dialogue with its recent sociological usage in the way Victor Nee, Lucas G. Drouhot, Richard D. Alba,
and Rogers Brubaker refined it. See Lucas G. Drouhot and Victor Nee, "Assimilation and the Second

Despite the grim histories of assimilation, the term itself is still commonly used to mean adaptation to an unfamiliar environment. Rather than broadly reject assimilation as a problematic term, I reclaim usage of assimilation: I conceptualize assimilation as the process of change prompted by desire to understand and find comfort within one's social situation. Assimilatory processes then refer to any process that allude to assimilation and change associated with developing familiarity.

Group Listening, the musical practice that is the central topic of this dissertation, is a concept I created to artistically engage with assimilation. Understanding music as assimilation allows me to treat various parameters that arise during assimilation as creative parameters. These parameters can involve any aspect of a social situation, such as relationship dynamics, distribution of authority or power dynamics, types of language being used, and styles of interactions. As such, practicing Group Listening means using the parameters of assimilation to design different assimilatory processes around the activity of making music together.[2] For instance, a simple social situation can be devised where the group decides each person can only say one word to indicate their creative intent, then spend 5 minutes improvising music as a group based on what each person said. They could iterate saying single words and improvising for an unlimited amount of time, and the group would find their own logic and playful strategy between the one-word exchanges and playing music. In this example of Group Listening, the parameters of assimilation being

Generation in Europe and America: Blending and Segregating Social Dynamics between Immigrants and Natives," *Annual Review of Sociology* 45 (2019): 177–99, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073117-041335; Richard D Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2004).

[2] The use of the word design is an intentional choice to avoid using the word *compose,* as in music composition. While it is possible to argue that the definition of music composition has been sufficiently problematized and subsequently widened to encompass any attempt to organize music, the multifaceted nature of Group Listening (explained in Chapter 3) means that multiple activities within a single Group Listening project could be construed as composing or composition. Thus, to avoid confusion, the word design is used to describe the creative ideation and conceptual formulation of a Group Listening project. While design can be determinative as well, I am using the term to mean the making of guidelines wherein iterative and creative activities unfold.

designed are: how verbal communication is enacted (reflected in the decision to limit verbal communication to a single word), how music making is enacted (reflected in the decision to limit musical improvisation to 5 minutes), and how the two social activities of verbal exchange and music improvisation relate to one another (reflected in the decision to alternate between single-word verbal exchanges with periods of improvisation, and to have the improvisation be inspired by what was said verbally). In this way, Group Listening can be understood as a creative practice where a group of musicians design and facilitate assimilatory scenarios for themselves to perform within.

I organized sessions where this way of making music was rehearsed and performed with the help of a group of musicians. We came to call ourselves Ensemble Consensus, and we were dedicated solely to designing and performing Group Listening projects.[3] This dissertation uses projects that Ensemble Consensus undertook as case studies for researching Group Listening both as a form of assimilation and a practice of music. The experiences of Consensus members are key sites for analysis towards drawing conclusions about how those who carried out Group Listening were negotiating their performance of assimilatory processes.

My own experiences with cultural assimilation—where customs and values were too often introduced as unquestioned normalities rather than as constructed and contested myths or hegemonies—feed my understanding of any kind of assimilatory processes (i.e., establishing norms, rules, and social codes) as constructed. Observing that musical rehearsals had a unique potential to embrace the types of vulnerability and ambiguity I desired, I started practicing Group Listening as a way of constructing different ways of rehearsing.

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[3] In addition to the full name, I will also refer to Ensemble Consensus as Consensus for short throughout this dissertation.

1.2 How to Contextualize Group Listening

Understanding the cultural situation that Group Listening was developed out of requires an inquiry into how my transient lived experience is intertwined with the contemporary identity formation of Koreanness, as in what it means to be Korean and to be from Korea. Korea is where my ancestors and I were born. Investigating my relationship to Koreanness is a crucial part of contextualizing Group Listening because it explains why I came to recognize assimilatory processes as valuable in and of themselves, and as a site for creativity. Like many other migratory Koreans, I have a complicated relationship with my place of birth. I emigrated at age four, which means I experienced assimilation not only within the various cultures I migrated to, but also my own culture. Assimilation to Koreanness is an ever-present challenge in my sense of selfhood, especially since I only lived in Korea for weeks at a time after emigrating.

The necessity for assimilation into the culture of one's own birthplace produces a condition that I identify as rootlessness. I understand rootlessness as the feeling of being out of place and the loss of an unequivocal sense of home in terms of place, identity, and/or community. Rootlessness is a central concept that clarifies both the contemporary construction of Koreanness and the creative impulse to practice Group Listening, because it is the emotional condition from which assimilation is initiated. Rootlessness is at first deeply unsettling, but it can lead to feelings of liberation and empowerment. Each time I feel rootlessness is an acute reminder of my potential to change, and of the impermanence of any constructed sense of selfhood. I argue that accepting rootlessness as a feature within Koreanness allows for a constantly changing, living idea of Korean peoplehood. Such redefinition of Koreanness makes space for the multiplicity of social realities that being Korean entails today. This in turn allows my lived experience to exist as a part of Koreanness, rather than in conflict with it, and for Group Listening to be considered Korean

music.[4] When practicing Group Listening, every musician faces rootlessness as a creative premise. While guidelines direct how each musician should relate to one another, through iterative realization of different types of activities, each musician is confronted with rootlessness when finding their place within the group. In doing so each musician undergoes assimilation via setting up their own strategies for how to engage with the group and the guidelines. Therefore, rootlessness serves as a conceptual and emotional bond between Group Listening, Koreanness, and assimilation.

Group Listening is also a practice that specifically concerns group improvisation and musical experimentalism. I understand improvisation to be the real-time creative decision-making, strategizing, and experimenting required to participate in any social and/or musical situation. As such, improvisation is intimately related to assimilation. Improvisation plays a vital function within assimilation and the various home-making efforts in response to rootlessness both within and outside the context of music and rehearsal. Assimilation happens when one is faced with an unfamiliar social situation. The various attempts at finding one's place within said unfamiliar situation are acts of improvisation. As an artistic act and an act of music making, group improvisation in the context of Group Listening can be understood as "dialogical engagements between improvisers," where each improviser is "receiving, negotiating, responding to, and attempting to create meaningful utterances and gestures in real-time."[5] In this way, improvisation within Group Listening is at once a musical and extramusical practice, with assimilation acting as the social metaphor to a

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[4] I will further clarify how and why Group Listening should be considered Korean music in Chapter 2.
[5] Here, I am borrowing from Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw's explanation of group improvisation. Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw, "Introduction: What Is Social Aesthetics?," in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, ed. Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

specific way of facilitating group improvised music. Throughout this dissertation, the term improvisation will be used interchangeably to reference both the social and the musical.[6]

It is worth emphasizing that by drawing this analogy, I am not implying a de facto hierarchy where the assimilating individual is subjugated by whatever culture is most dominantly performed within a group. As I will cover in Chapter 2, my reclamation of assimilation as a concept and social phenomenon is dependent both on the individual's agency *and* the malleability of any collective, which nurtures the possibility of home-making in a myriad of different ways with varying periods of comfort and discomfort. Simply put, everybody is always improvising from the moment a new person enters a social situation, not just the new person. The plasticity of the collective is in fact what makes assimilation possible, and what gives the improvisatory act of assimilating continued meaning. This aligns with what George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut saw as an important turn in critical improvisation studies:

> The view of artistic improvisation as symbolizing social and political formations was dear to many authors in an earlier moment of improvisation studies. Newer critical engagements with the practice tended to turn this view on its head, finding that social and political formations themselves improvise and that improvisation not only enacts such formations directly but also is fundamentally constitutive of them.[7]

Therefore, it is not just that Group Listening uses improvisation within rehearsal to artistically represent assimilation, assimilation and assimilatory processes are themselves

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[6] Improvisation as a term was taught to me as the antithesis to composition in most of my institutional musical education, which reflects what scholars George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut described as the "dialectic between improvisation and composition" and "improvisation's fraught status in Western classical music history and culture" where composition "presumed advantages of unity and coherence in musical utterance" (2016). Lewis and Piekut posit that thinking outside of this binary notion of improvisation-versus-composition, defining precisely what improvisation is becomes a fruitless task. Instead, improvisation should be approached as a lively, contentious, and porous term, where it can serve as the subject of various bodies of knowledge including but not limited to music. I will follow in this direction and avoid positioning improvisation as the antithesis to composition in the context of Group Listening. See George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–38.

[7] Lewis and Piekut.

acts of improvisation. Establishing assimilation *as* improvisation is an important premise to this dissertation.

Musical experimentalism is a term I will use to reference broadly an attitude towards making music that hinges on iteratively trying something without knowing what might happen. As Andrew Pickering points out, this type of artistic understanding of experiment deviates from any precise, scientific understanding of "experiment." I find Pickering's idea of experimentalism as "brute finding out" and as representing of the question of "what happens if…?" to be useful.[8] This idea is also reminiscent of John Cage's widely referenced sentiment from 1955 regarding the term "experimental." Cage states: "'experimental' is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown."[9] While the latter part of Cage's statement remains relevant to musical experimentalism as I use it in this dissertation, success and failure seem capable of coexisting with the experimental as subjective notions of satisfaction. Ultimately, the experimental is a contested idea where asserting a clear definition is perhaps counterproductive to its premise. It is also important to recognize that any history of musical experimentalism, especially within North America and Western Europe, will reveal how some practices were widely recognized within the idea of experimentalism, thereby gaining cultural cachet, while others were marginalized. This is especially prevalent within the history of Black American experimental music practices.[10] Given this, my use of musical experimentalism is more of an attempt to conceptually unify approaches to making art that I see as relevant to Group Listening. When attitudes of experimentalism are displayed outside of the immediate context of music making, I use the

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[8] Andrew Pickering, "Art, Science and Experiment," *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.2.

[9] John Cage, "Experimental Music," *I.M.A. Magazine*, June 1955.

[10] For two examples, see George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2011).

terms "experimental" and "experiment" to refer to the basic idea of trying various strategies without knowing what the outcome will be. It is no coincidence that using "experiment" in this way has a similar connotation to the way improvisation is used and understood, as the two are interrelated and similar concepts.[11]

Research into other group improvisation practices is considered throughout this dissertation. I draw parallels between Ensemble Consensus's strategies for music making and those of other improvised music groups to recognize similarities and emplace Group Listening within the field of experimental and improvised music. In some ways, it would be simpler to limit the contextualization of Group Listening to other music performance practices, without drawing broader connections to Korean identity and history. However, I found that most of the artistic precedents that felt aligned to Group Listening in terms of creative and sociopolitical goals came out of 20th-century Europe and the United States. While Group Listening was a practice that Consensus developed in the United States, I felt that this limited contextualization did not sufficiently answer the question of why Group Listening existed. Additionally, I was most compelled by scholarly work that positioned other musical experimentalisms as emergent from what felt necessary within the artists' social situation.[12] As such, I did not want to shy away from delving into the broader social context of Korea.

This is not to separate Koreanness from musical improvisation and experimentalism. Improvised music can be studied from a myriad of angles: each of the many improvisation practices that Koreans engage with today offer a unique direction. Similarly, experimentalism can be found within a number of different Korean musical practices. I

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[11] To understand this link within the context of another ensemble, see Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*.

[12] Two great examples for me were Martha Mockus's work on Pauline Oliveros and George Lewis's work on the AACM. See Martha Mockus, *Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008); Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*.

would argue that musical experimentalism can be used as a lens for understanding various cultures of music within Korea. Research that explicitly addresses how the three overlap as "Korean experimental improvised music" is scarce and pursuing this inquiry could be an entire dissertation unto itself. Hence, I situate Group Listening as but one example of improvisation and experimentalism that has implications for Koreanness. Therefore, the assertion that Group Listening is a Korean experimental improvised music practice should not be mistaken as an assertion of conceptual lineage from like-minded Korean artists or musicians. How other experimental Korean improvisers think through their own practice in terms of Koreanness could be an interesting future research inquiry. Further, my discussion of rootlessness and assimilation as part of Koreanness may allow other Korean experimental improvisers to relate their own practice to concerns of Koreanness.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Approaching Practice as Research

Group Listening, the creative practice of collaboratively making and performing music, is the main methodology for this dissertation. As the distinct way in which Ensemble Consensus goes about making music and the creative ethos of the group, Group Listening is in and of itself an original contribution to the field of musical performance, improvisation, and composition, where collective music-making is the main strategy by which knowledge is being produced. Furthermore, the knowledge that is produced from practicing Group Listening is used to clarify how the social concepts of assimilation and rootlessness can inform music making.

The medium in which the practice of Group Listening operates is creative performance. The musical performances that are most directly relevant to this research are the various rehearsals and public concerts that Consensus organized between 2018 and 2020. Knowledge produced during performance is embodied by those who experienced the music performance practice. The focus of this dissertation is particularly on the experience

of those who embodied Group Listening by performing and participating in Ensemble Consensus. As such, Group Listening can be understood as what Phil Ford calls a "technology of experience": it is a practice which "directs what performers must do in order to have a certain kind of experience, but those words in no way represent the experience itself, and the experience is really what matters."[13] Because the experience of Group Listening plays out by doing the performance ourselves, Ensemble Consensus is also engaging with what Kerry O'Brien calls "experimentalism of the self" wherein the main site of attempting the technology of experience (Group Listening) is ourselves.[14]

While Group Listening produces knowledge immediately at the site of performance, additional methodologies are necessary to enable a written dissertation about the practice. The transfer of knowledge from the medium of creative performance to written language necessitates the use of additional methodologies to answer a core set of research inquiries: what Group Listening is, why it exists, how it is understood and practiced, and what makes it meaningful and significant. The following methodologies are in support of the written discussion of these inquiries in the form of an academic dissertation.

1.3.2 Documentation and Archiving

Collecting and maintaining primary documents of various Consensus activities is a key methodology in transferring knowledge from the creative performance medium to the written medium. Keeping comprehensive audio recordings of most of our activities provided an important foundation to the overall written research because the recordings enable verification of how Consensus members experienced or remembered certain aspects of our creative performances. For instance, we often revisited audio recordings before or during interviews I conducted with Consensus members to discuss their Group Listening

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[13] See Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[14] Kerry O'Brien, "Experimentalisms of the Self: Experiments in Art and Technology, 1966–1971" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2018), 1-20.

experience. Primary documents and recordings often prompted a more detailed recollection of the creative experience.

An ever-growing Google Drive folder with unlimited memory space (backed-up on a 1TB physical hard drive) exists as a space where ensemble members and I collect all archival materials for the ensemble including notes from sessions and meetings, photos, audio and video recordings, guidelines and various project development documents for each of our projects, drafts of the ensemble's biography, program notes, etc. Consensus's website also serves as an archival site for public documentations of our activities (Chang et al. 2020).

1.3.3 Historical Review and Personal History

While Group Listening as a practice emphasizes collective music making, the reasons why Group Listening exists the way it does are personal to me and my lived experience. In addition, because I organized Ensemble Consensus and was the instigator for Group Listening projects, my experience of Group Listening is a main site of inquiry. Thus, personal history and lived experience provide important information for contextualizing and analyzing Group Listening. Chapters 2 and 3 construct a narrative around the circumstances which brought about Group Listening and Ensemble Consensus. Chapters 4 and 5 combine my experience and insight of Group Listening projects with those of other Consensus members. To write these chapters, I drew on a combination of reflexive strategies that sought to legitimize the personal, including Scholarly Personal Narrative,[15] "vulnerable" anthropology,[16] story-telling,[17] and sensory autoethnography.[18] Nash and Narayan's work

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[15] See R.J Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2004).
[16] See Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1996).
[17] See Kirin Narayan, *Alive in the Writing* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[18] See Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009); Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Steven Feld, *Sound and*

pushed me to consider my personal narrative around assimilation and Koreanness as the context for my creative practice. Behar's work encouraged me to center discussions of emotions, namely rootlessness, as crucial aspects of understanding Group Listening. Pink's pedagogical writings on sensory emplaced learning and interpreting multisensory research informed the way I processed my memories, lived experiences, and embodied creative practice into academic prose. Utilizing a mixture of strategies offered by Nash, Narayan, Behar, and Pink, I established a writing routine where I regularly reflected on how and why Group Listening existed. Upon synthesizing the content of my reflexive writing routine, I realized that assimilation and rootlessness were central themes to Group Listening.

To dialogue personal history with identity formation surrounding Koreanness, I conducted a historical review of what influenced contemporary Korean identity formation using scholarship from adoption studies, Korean studies, and Korean musicology. These works help debunk widely held cultural myths within Korea that I was raised with, using lesser-known history of modern and pre-modern Korea. Simultaneously, I recognize that other musical practices that come out of different social contexts, especially those that involve experimental improvisation and can be considered technologies of experience, are useful in drawing parallels and comparisons to further clarify the method of Group Listening. A review of these kindred practices situates Group Listening among the field of music improvisation and experimentation.

1.3.4 Interviews and Oral History

The insight and reflections provided by Consensus members serve as vital evidence of the ways in which Group Listening evokes assimilatory thinking and rootlessness. Having maintained a close relationship with each of the ensemble members throughout their engagement with Consensus, I was confident in their ability to trust me and speak candidly

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Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1982).

to me about their experiences. I conducted many one-on-one and small-group interviews with Consensus members. A protocol to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was submitted and approved, and each interviewee's consent was obtained prior to any in-person interview occurring.[19]

Strategies for these interviews were informed by oral history traditions and sensory ethnography.[20] The interviews occurred in a casual setting: many occurred at my apartment in New York City where we sat and talked in my living room. I set up the environment to be as colloquial and conversational as possible, so that the interviewee felt like the interview was no different than any other conversation they would have with me. Sometimes food, snacks, and refreshments were involved, as they often were when we spent time together under regular social circumstances. I emphasized that the interview was meant to be a conversation about our experience, and the interviewees were free to ask me questions, so that I was not the only one posing questions reflecting on our performance. For interviews that had to be scheduled several weeks after a performance, I played a recording of the performance on my computer while we reflected. Playing a recording of our performance during the interview was a strategy I derived from Pink's sensory ethnography—using audiovisual recordings to refresh the sensory memories of the interviewee. Often interviewees reacted to hearing or seeing certain parts of the performance by remembering specifics about what they were feeling at the time, or correcting something that they might have misremembered.

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[19] See appendix for IRB Protocol Description and Consent Form.
[20] Rhonda Y. Williams, "'I'm a Keeper of Information': History-Telling and Voice," *Oral History Review* 28, no. 1 (2001): 41–63, http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/doi/10.1525/ohr.2001.28.1.41; Lenore Layman, "Reticence in Oral History Interviews," *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 207–30; Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*.

1.3.5 Limitation

While discussion of the limitations of one's methodology often comes at the conclusion of a dissertation, a notable exclusion of one methodology should be addressed in this introduction. This dissertation does not contain analysis of the musical outcome of Group Listening projects undertaken by Ensemble Consensus. This means that while this is a dissertation about a particular way of collectively performing music, it contains very little about what the music sounded like, due to the chosen scope of study. Introducing assimilation as the reason behind Group Listening means understanding how Group Listening facilitated social processes for the members of Ensemble Consensus. The major analytical concern is with the members' experience, and how Group Listening projects were designed to facilitate specific experiences.

The cause of this limitation is not because what Ensemble Consensus's music sounded like did not matter to us. In fact, we often talked about how we sounded after rehearsing or performing together: what some of the interesting moments were, what we thought sounded particularly good, and which moments we thought could be better. However, drawing connections between the intricacies of what the collective musical outcome of Group Listening sounded like, and its core social concepts of rootlessness and assimilation, is a significant challenge. Attempting to locate evidence of assimilation and rootlessness within the sounds produced by the musicians is too speculative because sonic gestures and utterances in Group Listening are not representative of rootlessness or assimilation. In other words, the musical sounds of Group Listening projects may not symbolize or communicate anything specific about rootlessness and assimilation. Music functions a medium of expression for Consensus to enact creative and assimilatory processes within. As such, musical and sonic analysis may be an ineffective strategy for illuminating how assimilation and rootlessness are fundamental to Group Listening. Instead, the research methodologies I chose allow musicians to verbally communicate how they

chose to express themselves. Centering musicians, rather than the music, enables

rootlessness and assimilation to arise as key concepts that were considered by each

musician when navigating and strategizing their participation within Group Listening

projects. As the first scholarly research into Group Listening, this dissertation will instead

provide a substantive explanation of the social context of Group Listening and how members

of Ensemble Consensus experienced its assimilatory processes. An inquiry into the musical

outcomes of Group Listening could be a productive future investigation.

1.4 Summary of Chapters

Chapter 2 delves deeper into the contextualization of Group Listening in relation to

assimilation, rootlessness, and Koreanness. The chapter begins by clarifying the use of the

term assimilation and setting up the conceptual bearings around the term, as well as how

rootlessness as the emotional premise of assimilation is centered in the discussion of Group

Listening and Koreanness. I investigate rootlessness through the cultural impact of

colonialism in modern Korea, using a set of works from Korean history and musicology as

evidence. I argue that a Koreanness which embraces rootlessness is better equipped to

support more liberated, decolonial, and deimperialist possibilities. I examine how

reductionist notions of Koreanness, that are simpler to promote and construct a concrete

identity under, came about as a result of colonialist projects. By drawing parallels between

Korean identity formation and musical identity formation within Group Listening, I

demonstrate that valuing rootlessness and the assimilatory process itself, not only as a

transitional state, but as a continuous state of change and home-making, can be an

empowering decolonial strategy.

Chapter 3 introduces the origin story of Ensemble Consensus and the framework we

used to design and analyze Group Listening projects. I describe the immediate and personal

social circumstances from which Ensemble Consensus originated, as well as who Ensemble

Consensus began with. The framework identifies four main activity-types that are present in

all rehearsals, and therefore all Group Listening projects. Labeled as "modalities of interactions," the framework is used throughout future chapters to reference specific moments or aspects within Group Listening projects.

Chapters 4 and 5 reflect on five projects Ensemble Consensus took on between 2018~2021. I investigate the social, relational, and cultural dynamics that contributed to and unfolded around the group with each project we undertook. Chapter 4 contains a detailed analysis of a 2018 project titled *Resident Alien*. Chapter 5 contains more concise analyses of four other projects that took place after *Resident Alien.* Across the two chapters, I highlight how matters of assimilation and rootlessness manifested in Consensus's experience of designing and performing Group Listening.

Chapter 6 offers a closing reflection on the throughlines between assimilation, rootlessness, Koreanness, Group Listening, and Ensemble Consensus. This chapter also includes a summary of methodological and other research-related limitations, and future directions for inquiry.

CHAPTER 2:

CONTEXTUALIZING GROUP LISTENING VIA ASSIMILATION, ROOTLESSNESS, AND

KOREANNESS

2.1 Clarifying Assimilation

To engage with Group Listening is to engage with assimilation. My lived experience with assimilation began in my formative years. I was born in the Southern part of the Korean peninsula governed by the Republic of Korea (colloquially South Korea) to Korean parents and familial lineage. Starting at four years old, I emigrated with my parents from Korea to Singapore, then Taiwan, then China, before moving by myself to the United States of America (U.S.) in 2011, where I live today. Since leaving Korea, I have iteratively constructed, rejected, questioned, negotiated, and reimagined my relationship to, and understanding of, Koreanness on countless occasions. I have always felt like I needed to assimilate to my birthplace from a position of unbelonging—this feeling I define as rootlessness.

The term assimilation warrants clarification. As I have alluded to in the introduction, political, physical, and cultural domination has often been the objective for assimilation. As such, sadistic efforts towards assimilation are evident within the context of colonization and colonial era policies.[21] I argue for a reclamation of the term assimilation, not to diminish the atrocities committed in pursuit of forced integration under colonization, but as a strategy to correct the historically problematic usage of the term and redefine assimilation towards empowering the experiences of people undergoing significant cultural, geographical, and/or

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[21] Just as colonization can be studied from a myriad of different contexts and places globally, assimilation policies can be studied within each history of colonization. An example of scholarship around the violence of assimilation policies within the context of Korea is Caprio's 2009 book which details the historical origins, establishment, and evolution of assimilation policies enacted by the Japanese empire. Within the context of North America, Ellinghaus's 2017 book illuminates the biologistic violence enacted upon Native Americans by the U.S. government in the name of assimilation. See Mark E. Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009); Katherine Ellinghaus, *Blood Will Tell: Native Americans and Assimilation Policy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

identity change. Efforts to refine understandings of assimilation have been dominated by

sociological studies which focus on population-level research. Critiquing the past approach

to assimilation, Brubaker defines *transitive* understandings of assimilation as problematic

because they frame "populations of immigrant origin as moldable, meltable objects."[22]

Brubaker argued for more *intransitive* understandings that seek to treat people and

populations as active subjects.[23] More recent scholarship expands on Brubaker's initial

critiques to embrace the multitude of factors at play when assimilation happens at various

individual and cultural levels, as Drouhot and Nee's 2019 definition of assimilation

exemplifies:

> Assimilation is a complex and multidimensional convergence process occurring at
>
> socioeconomic (resource distributions and socioeconomic attainment), relational
>
> (preference in marriage and friendship, extent of intergroup contact and trust) and
>
> cultural (subjective feeling of belonging, being considered "one of us" by the majority
>
> group, engaging in cultural practices identified with immigrant community at little or
>
> no social costs at all) levels.[24]

While there is a lot to unpack from this definition, I want to highlight two factors that are

especially relevant to assimilation as I use it in this dissertation: the understanding of

assimilation as a process, and the subjective feeling of belonging.

Assimilation should be understood as an iterative and ongoing multidimensional

process, rather than one that carries a vector such as convergence or similarity. Drouhot

and Nee's definition still implies that when the time comes that the assimilating subject

sufficiently feels belonging, and "being considered 'one of us' by the majority group" then

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[22] Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups,* 129.
[23] Brubaker, 129.
[24] Drouhot and Nee, "Assimilation and the Second Generation in Europe and America: Blending and Segregating Social Dynamics between Immigrants and Natives," 179.

theoretically, there could be a completion of the assimilatory process. While they argue that assimilation "does not imply homogenization," Drouhot and Nee's conception still holds onto the notion that convergence is a defining factor of assimilation.[25] Of course, the etymology of the word assimilation clashes with my argument in that "likeness" and "similarity" are embedded within the word itself.[26] However, there is no such friction when considering the quotidian use of the word. Consider a statement such as, "It took me a while to assimilate, but I feel more at home now." The core purpose of such a message is not to highlight how much more *similar* one has become to the people of their new environment, but to draw attention to one's emotional evolution: the subjective experience of the process of change initiated by a transition in social circumstance.

Notice that the common sentiment of taking time to assimilate and gradually feeling more at home does seem to imply an emotional trajectory from uncertainty towards belonging. This may seem contradictory to my initial argument; however, the emotion of belonging does not imply convergence. The feeling of belonging is delicate and temporary. Belonging is intimately linked with how one views one's own sense of comfort. When one is feeling discomfort from their social situation, there are myriad acts of home-making that can strive towards the sense of comfort, and thus belonging. However, actions that provided comfort initially may not necessarily continue to provide comfort in the same way after some time has passed. In essence, striving to feel belonging is of course embedded within the notion of assimilation, but the emotional desire for comfort does not necessitate a theoretical resolution or conceptual arrival point. Assimilation is a continuous process of change that stems from a desire to understand and find comfort within one's social situation.

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[25] Drouhot and Nee, 179.
[26] Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups, 124*.

To approach assimilation as endless and without trajectory is to recognize that relationships and identities are always living and open to change in multidimensional ways. It allows for a more personal examination of assimilation that rejects notions of any person being more or less assimilated than another. Growing up, I was often considered more assimilated to my English-speaking school because I spoke with an accent more similar to that of North American English speakers of European descent compared to peers who spoke with an accent more associated with Korean English speakers. This did not align with my sense of belonging; the behavioral likeness had little to do with my emotional sense of comfort. Valuing the assimilatory process itself helps shift assimilation away from being used as a measure for social integration.

2.2 Understanding Group Listening as Rehearsal and Assimilation

Like assimilation, Group Listening is an iterative process that has no theoretical resolution or end point. Group Listening as a practice designs assimilatory processes for musicians to embody and enact. Within the context of music-making, the assimilatory process happens most consequentially during rehearsals. Thus, Group Listening can also be understood as a way of designing rehearsals. Each Group Listening project results in an iterative process. Upon completion of every cycle, musicians do not move towards any specific goal. The possibility of change is always present, and each musician has the agency to contribute to changing the group's musical performance.

Parallels between rehearsals and assimilation exist because both describe a social experience where one gets to know their surroundings and the explicit and/or implicit rules of play. The way in which a group of musicians decides to rehearse is, intentionally or not, a highly nuanced practice. While a lot of learning happens during performances (public showings) as well, rehearsals are where learning and change are explicit—they are a part of the creative process where the musical sound-making can be paused to ask questions to one another, (re)set expectations, resolve conflicts, gauge enjoyment, build anticipation,

etc. Even when there is "no rehearsal" in that no actual sounds are practiced, any and every conversation, correspondence, and engagement of social connection between musicians that precede musical play provides information that aids in one's assimilation in preparation for group play. In this way, I define "rehearsal" as any space in which various pre-show play, experimentations, training, discussions, activities, socializing, thinking, decisions, and feelings may occur. During rehearsals, creativity is most flexible and vulnerable, and musicians observably negotiate their socio-creative identities and ideologies in preparation for co-creative action.

Each Group Listening project necessitates that musicians co-create a specific way of rehearsing music based on a creative prompt. The creative prompt can be anything: for instance, prompts for Ensemble Consensus's projects have included listening to predetermined audio samples (as in *Resident Alien*), getting dressed and made up (as in *All Out*), and co-writing poetry (as in *Song Cycling*). Group Listening enables the ensemble and me to shape how assimilation manifests, and how the design and facilitation of rehearsals/assimilatory processes influences the way musicians engage with one another. As such, rehearsals for Group Listening projects often sounded and felt like meta-rehearsals—rehearsing for a specific way of rehearsing; practicing for how we were going to practice together.

Even though we approached rehearsals as a site of play/design/facilitation as a way to play with assimilation itself, the layered nature of our practice meant that there were nevertheless inherent social dynamics, lived experiences, and cultural contexts that existed outside of the experimental space of our group. These differences affected not only how we designed our Group Listening projects, but how our rehearsals and performances of Group Listening projects played out. Different ways of rehearsing brought about different emotions of comfort and belonging within individual members of the group. Various emotions of

comfort and belonging inspired ideas for different ways of rehearsing, which led to the design of new projects.

2.3 Rethinking Koreanness in Terms of Assimilation

My assimilation to Koreanness involves rethinking the definitions and forms of Koreanness that I was familiarized with growing up. Doing so is an act of home-making, where I make it possible for Group Listening to exist as part of the narrative of Koreanness. Because of my emigrant status, Koreanness has often been presented as something I should adapt to, rather than something I have agency over as a Korean person. Koreanness was conceptualized as a definite certainty, rooted in thousands of years of history, that I was circumstantially excluded from. The implication was that had I grown up in Korea, I would better understand how deeply rooted this immovable Koreanness was.

A critical examination of 20th century Korean history reveals that Koreanness underwent multiple stages of uprooting since colonization around 1910, and how the mainstream understanding of Koreanness seeks to minimize the impact such disruptions had on Korean peoplehood. In other words, Korea was forced to undergo assimilation under oppressive sociopolitical circumstances, and as a reactive means of reclaiming identity, Koreanness as I experienced it tries to shield itself from notions of assimilation by asserting its certainty.

Just as Group Listening and assimilation have no end or resolution, Koreanness too should be understood as a continuously living and changing conception of peoplehood. Koreanness is faced with many concerns of assimilation in the contemporary world, and while finding a sense of security (perhaps akin to belonging at the personal level) is a worthy quest, this should not be confused with striving for an end, ideal notion of Koreanness. Attempts to construct a Koreanness that is resistant to change and assimilation results in reductive and essentialist notions of peoplehood that inevitably exclude some Koreans from being able to take part in Koreanness. Koreanness must exist as an endless

process of understanding peoplehood, because as a contested and living concept, it can better suit the variety of ways Korean people relate to their Korean identity.

2.4 Locating Rootlessness Within Group Listening and Koreanness

As stated in the Introduction, rootlessness is the feeling of unbelonging and unfamiliarity that is the emotional premise behind assimilation. Learning to value rootlessness itself plays an important part in understanding how assimilation functions in both Group Listening and Koreanness. Rootlessness plays several key roles in the narrative contextualization of my practice and conceptual understanding of my relationship to Korea. First, by claiming rootlessness as a condition that clarifies contemporary Koreanness, rootlessness pushes Koreanness toward a living concept of peoplehood. Through finding meaning within rootlessness, assimilation in terms of Korea becomes less about converging into a fixed notion of Koreanness, but engaging with a dynamic and changing cultural situation. Second, experiencing rootlessness is the impetus for Group Listening. Treating rootlessness itself as meaningful within my own musical upbringing allowed me to start thinking about rehearsal as an assimilatory process that could be creatively experimented with. Lastly, when rootlessness can be considered both a premise in Group Listening and a contemporary characteristic of Koreanness, it is possible for Koreanness to become a conceptual home to Group Listening, and for Group Listening to belong within the narrative of Korean music.

In order to arrive at this conclusion, which holistically clarifies the dynamics between assimilation, rootlessness, Group Listening, and Koreanness, I must address how rootlessness manifests within Koreanness by discussing Korean history and establishing a fundamental understanding of colonialism in Korea. While this may seem extraneous to a dissertation discussing a musical practice that took place in New York City, an in-depth discussion of Koreanness is crucial to properly contextualizing rootlessness, and therefore Group Listening. Without justifying rootlessness as being part of Koreanness, the concept of

rootlessness would have to be limited to my own transient lived experience and highlighted only by the absence of connection with my place of origin. Providing such an incomplete picture of my relationship with Korea perpetuates the notion that my transience makes me an exception to what Koreanness is and prevents Koreanness itself from being implicated within notions of rootlessness and assimilation.

2.4.1 Historicizing Rootlessness Within Colonialism

Rootlessness arises as a byproduct of colonization, which violently destabilized Koreans' sense of being during the 20th century. Colonialism in Korea should be understood in two distinct eras: the Japanese occupation between 1910 and 1945, and of American and Soviet military occupation post-1945 that led to the Korean War and the division of the Korean peninsula into two warring nation states in armistice—Republic of Korea (South) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North). While most Koreans colloquially refer to the end of Japanese occupation as "liberation," the U.S. military government that ruled the Southern part of Korea under protest from 1945 until 1950 started a neocolonial and imperialist project in Korea that continues to the present day.[27] I will focus on the second era post-1945, because Japanese occupation is commonly recognized as oppression and colonization within mainstream discussions of Korean history, whereas U.S. occupation and subsequent political involvement is rarely discussed in terms of neocolonialism. The atrocities and dehumanizing methods used to undermine Korean people and culture during

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[27] Neocolonialism, as Kwame Nkrumah conceptualized is, a situation where "the State which is subject to [neocolonialism] is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus political policy is directed from outside" (1966). Nkrumah positions imperialism as the power dynamic between the empire and subjugated states, while both colonialism and neocolonialism are instruments of imperialism (1966)—where colonialism is the more overt military state-takeover of a land and their political system, and neocolonialism's most salient tool for political oppression is economy. With regards to the Korean peninsula, I characterize the early military takeover by US troops as colonialist, and the subsequent control the U.S. maintained via economic dependence as neocolonialist. I will also use parentheticals on the prefix "neo" when referring to both colonial and neocolonial aspects: i.e. (neo)colonialism. See Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1966).

Japanese occupation are widely documented, researched, and publicized.[28] Growing up, I was educated in detail about the various cruelties and resistance movements that occurred during Japanese colonization. Family stories were passed down as well detailing how my grandmother and great-grandmother remembered and survived that time.

By contrast, the narrative of United States' post-World War II saviorism and positioning as supposed ideological originators of democratic governance, perpetuates a widespread, inaccurate narrative that U.S. occupation in Southern Korea post-World War II was an inevitable transitional period between the end of Japanese occupation and independent governance. This narrative is built on "the myth of American exceptionalism: that U.S. history is void of imperial activities and that there is no such thing as American empire,"—in line with the U.S.'s continuing history of "proclaiming anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism" while failing to recognize white settler colonialism as the country's genesis.[29] The myth persists both within and outside South Korea, with many Koreans understanding colonialism as a political reality that ended in 1945 after World War II, rather than continuing its influence to present day.[30]

Research by Korean history scholars provides evidence to correct the erroneous narrative of this period. The revised narrative argues that U.S. Army Military Government in Korea ensured colonial continuity in the southern part of the peninsula initially through brute military force, followed by a neocolonial model of economic dependence. The U.S.

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[28] For a foundational review of the history see Man-gil Kang, *A History of Contemporary Korea* (Paju, South Korea: Changbi Publishers, 1994). For specific insight into war crimes against comfort women, see C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008). Additionally, for a social psychological review of contemporary public attitude towards Japanese colonization, see Hu Young Jeong and Johanna Ray Vollhardt, "Koreans' Collective Victim Beliefs About Japanese Colonization," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 27, no. 4 (2021): 629–41, https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000496.

[29] Soojin Pate, "Genealogies of Korean Adoption: American Empire, Militarization, and Yellow Desire" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2010), 41.

[30] I was taught this narrative by my parents, and my parents were taught this narrative in their school in Korea. Most friends and family who were Korean and around my age also believed this narrative to be true.

government purposefully exerted military rule in the southern part of Korea because they saw the peninsula's proximity to Russia made the region "vulnerable to Soviet influence," and that "if U.S. forces left Korea, it would strengthen communist ideology around the world," and "the world will instinctively question both the effectiveness and virility of the United States and its form of government."[31] The first Korean delegate for the United Nations, Louise Yim, stated in 1947 that the "negotiations between the Soviet Union and the U.S. over the 'unification for Korea' or the 'Democratization of Korea' was, ironically, stalling Korea's process of becoming democratic or independent."[32] The imperialist battle for control and power over Korea between the two nations led to economic collapse, as Yim went on to state that "Koreans starve as their economic life disintegrates" and are "frustrated because they cannot govern their own land."[33] The situation escalated to the point of riots happening in protest of uncontrolled inflation of the price of rice. U.S. Sergeant Harry Savage recounts in a letter to President Harry Truman that "restoring law and order during riots involves 'keep[ing] our machine guns blazing' and seeing 'dead bodies lying all over the streets.'"[34]

In response to the Korean peoples' uprising, the U.S. transitioned from brutal colonial military occupation to neocolonial economic strategies. The ROK-US Agreement on Aid kickstarted a "contentious donor-recipient relationship between the United States and Korea" that "required the Korean government to follow certain economic policies and capitalist practices set up by the U.S. government."[35] This practice continued for many years, where sociopolitical problems in South Korea were "solved with money and

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[31] Pate, "Genealogies of Korean Adoption: American Empire, Militarization, and Yellow Desire," 47-48.
[32] Pate, 48.
[33] Pate, 48.
[34] Pate, 51. This history is not widely taught or known amongst Koreans. My parents recalled that in school, they were taught specifically to think of American soldiers as our allies and saviors during World War II and the Korean War. My aunt was the sole family member who seemed to be aware of U.S. violence. She said that while she was not informed of the specifics, she knew that the U.S. did commit atrocities during this time.
[35] Pate, 54.

rehabilitation efforts of the U.S. military" so long as South Korea continued to "hold

allegiance to democracy and vilify Communism."[36] The U.S. spent $1.2 billion between

1945-1953 and close to $3 billion between 1953-1962 in economic and military aid.[37]

Paradoxically, democracy as form of governance was not established in South Korea until

1987. Before 1987, various military regimes determined South Korea's leaders in the form

of coups and dictatorships. Student-led protest movements (mainly the May 18 Gwangju

Democratization Movement of 1980, and the June Democratic Struggle of 1987) can be

credited for the slow and painful establishment of the democratic process in South Korea.[38]

Such historic evidence illustrates that the U.S. government's main goal in Korea was not

democratization, but rather global imperialism.[39]

    U.S. neocolonial imperialism forcibly initiated South Korea's indoctrination into global

capitalism, white supremacy, and inseparably, modernity.[40] Much of what the Japanese

Empire started in its efforts to assimilate Koreans as a second-class ethnic minority,

especially in terms of cultural erasure and industrialization, continued with modernity taking

hold as the only viable option for cultural and economic relevance under U.S. influence. By

asserting a continuity of coloniality between Japanese and U.S. imperialism over the Korean

people, we can start renegotiating Koreanness in a way that recognizes colonialism, and

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[36] Pate, 55.

[37] Pate, 55.

[38] Charles R. Kim, *Youth for Nation: Culture and Protest in Cold War South Korea* (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

[39] Pate credits the "postcolonial and transnational turn" in the 1990s and 2000s within the field of Asian American Studies with implicating "the United States as an imperial power" in East Asia. For more on this see Pate, "Genealogies of Korean Adoption: American Empire, Militarization, and Yellow Desire"; Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

[40] Mignolo and Quijano theorize the cultural interdependence between coloniality and modernity. This chapter builds on Mignolo and Quijano's theory and treats modernity as fueled by (neo)coloniality and vice-versa within the context of South Korea. The latter portions of this chapter will clarify how modernity as an extension of colonialism reproduces rootlessness. See Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–78.

thereby rootlessness, as a present issue, rather than a relic of the early to mid-20th century

Korea.

2.4.2 Rejection of Rootlessness in Mainstream Constructs of Koreanness

Today, "Korea" colloquially refers to two nation states—North Korea and South

Korea. It also serves as an ethnic category. Outside the geographic location of the Korean

peninsula, Korean-as-ethnicity is most often prominently visible in the form of Korean

immigrants who have acquired citizenship/permanent residence in a different nation-state,

or those who were born to Korean parents but raised in a different nation-state. Within

South Korea, these people are commonly referred to as *jewuegukmin* (literally translated as

"citizen living abroad") and/or *dongpo* (literally translated to be "siblings" or "of the same")

in Korea. There are also Korean ethnic minorities who reside within current nation-state

borders of the People's Republic of China, called the *Yeonbyun* region in Korean or *Yanbian*

in Chinese. The Koreans living there are indigenous to *Yeonbyun* and referred to as

Chaoxianzu (literally translated as "*Joseon* group") in Chinese, or *Joseonjok* in Korean,

referencing the last Korean dynasty of *Joseon* (*Chaoxian*) which lasted until colonization

around 1910.[41] Contemporary South Koreans choose the word *han* as the main character to

reference our ethnicity and identity: commonly using *hanminjok* to refer to all ethnic Korean

people, including the global Korean diaspora, and using *hanguk-saram* or *hanguk-in* to refer

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[41] Park Woo, Robert Easthope, and Chang Kyung-Sup, "China's Ethnic Minority and Neoliberal Developmental Citizenship: Yanbian Koreans in Perspective," *Citizenship Studies* 24, no. 7 (2020): 918–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2020.1812957.

to any Korean person in the singular.[42] There are estimated to be more than 7 million

Korean *dongpos* living abroad as of 2021.[43]

I broadly describe the state of where Koreans live today, and the various names

used to reference Koreans based on where and when we lived, to highlight the multiplicity

and differences in how we exist. Notice that the term *hanminjok* has been adopted in South

Korea attempts to refer all Koreans, no matter where their birthplace, nor their place of

living is. *Hanminjok* identifies Korean as a singular ethnic identity. A concept borne out of

the idea of a singular *hanminjok* is *minjoksung,* which refers to a Korean peoplehood that

arises out of ancient history, and that distinguishes Koreans from other ethnicities in an

essential, fundamental way. *Minjoksung* is a mainstream construct of Koreanness that

rejects rootlessness by asserting that Koreanness is innate and connected to a pre-colonial

past.

However, there has been very little evidence to show that Koreans understood

themselves as a singular ethnic identity before or even during Japanese colonization. Within

the context of music, scholar Jeon Jiyoung debunks the *minjoksung*-centric narrative that

presumes musicians of the colonial era realized that Korean music had to be preserved and

protected against the Japanese government, and performed Korean music by knowingly

risking their lives amid Japan's policies of assimilation and cultural erasure.[44] Through

unpacking primary documents by Korean musicians during the Japanese colonial era, Jeon

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[42] A reader who has little background on Korea may feel that there is a lot of information without much engagement with sources and citation in this paragraph. However, the information on Koreans in this paragraph is common knowledge to many Korean people. I am sharing information acquired through my own lived experience and translating vocabularies that are widely used by Koreans to refer to their own people. Nonetheless, the same information and definitions can be found on the Korean government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. See Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Definitions and Conditions of Jewuedongpo Koreans," Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021, accessed January 16, 2023, https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m_21507/contents.do.

[43] Affairs.

[44] Jiyoung Jeon, "Rethinking Ethnic Nationalism Reflected in 'Choson Music' Discourse during the Japanese Occupation Period," *Journal of the Society for Korean Historico-Musicology* 63 (2019): 185–202.

shows that while musicians' livelihoods were certainly threatened due to lack of

performance and employment opportunities, there is minimal evidence to suggest that

musicians, or the general public, holistically understood pre-colonial musical practices as

"Korean music" or "Joseon music" that represented Korean peoplehood (*hanminjok*) and

served as ethnocultural resistance to Japanese rule.[45] The main categorical understanding

among musicians who practiced "Joseon" music was the differentiation of court music

(*goongjungak*) and folk music (*minsokak*), which is reflective of the class-based social

system during the Joseon dynasty wherein both musical practices were contemporaneous.[46]

Jeon's evidence highlights that at the time, Korean people did not conceive of themselves as

ethnically singular.

Like *minjoksung*, *Han* is another commonly known cultural concept (a homonym to

the word that refers to Korea itself) that is supposed to represent an irrefutable essence of

Koreanness.[47] *Han* is an affect that refers to a deep sense of sorrow and injustice bigger

than the individual; it is often used to describe the deeply traumatic memories carried

collectively by the Korean population at large of historic periods within Korean history such

as war, colonial rule, and civil uprisings.[48] *Han* is considered unequivocally Korean and is

represented often as a biologism—running in the blood of all Koreans.[49] Scholar Sandra So

Hee Chi Kim describes *han* not only as "a consciousness of ongoing trauma and a lack of

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[45] "Joseon music" is what Koreans at the time would have referred to as "Korean music" since Joseon is the name of the dynasty that ruled prior to Japanese colonization. See Jiyoung Jeon.

[46] Jiyoung Jeon.

[47] Homonyms in Korean are distinguished by referencing the word's Chinese character equivalent, when and if it exists. Chinese character distinctions are possible in the case of *han* of *hanminjok* (韓) and the affect *han* (恨). See Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of '"The Beauty of Sorrow,"'" *Korean Studies* 41 (2017): 253–79, https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2017.0026.

[48] Kim 2017

[49] Sandra So Hee Chi Kim's 2017 article does a holistic history and contemporary analysis of *han.* Kim lays out the intricacies of how *han* is understood and used in various cultural contexts. The core ideas I summarize and use in this paper, but a deeper investigation into *han* is very much encouraged for any reader of this paper. See Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of '"The Beauty of Sorrow.'"'"

resolution" but also "the *means* to its own resolution."[50] Therefore, *Han* is referenced as the

"uniquely and beautifully" Korean element that manifests within authentically Korean

cultural practices (visual art, literature, film, music, poetry, ceramics, etc.).[51]

In fact, *han* is a relatively recent concept borne during the Japanese colonial era.

Notions of sorrow and sadness were used to distinguish Koreanness as part of grotesque

colonial strategies in which the Japanese empire sought to justify Korean rule through the

essentialization of Koreans as sad, primitive people who must be saved through Japanese

rule.[52] Aesthetics of Korean cultural artefacts were branded with the "beauty of sorrow" as a

way of exoticizing the Korean people. As Kim states, "the characterization of Koreans as a

sorrowful people served to provide a racialized essence that helped support a larger

endeavor to categorize the ways in which Koreans were different from the Japanese" and in

turn, "justify the need for Japan's superior leadership."[53]

Despite its origins, *han* is widely accepted as a "biologistic" affective quality that

encapsulates Korean culture and aesthetics.[54] The colonial origins of *han* are rarely

discussed as part of the usage of the word, which makes it difficult to argue that *han* was a

conscious reclamation of colonial depictions of Koreans. Rather, the colonial continuity

established by the U.S. ensured that Koreanness remained of categorical and ethnic

concern, which pushed Koreans to adopt essential ethnic definitions "in order to be seen

within a dominant culture that threatened to erase them."[55] Similarly, the value of

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[50] Kim, 256.
[51] Kim.
[52] Kim.
[53] Kim, 261.
[54] Kim.
[55] Kim, 268.

minjoksung is also reliant on mourning what was taken away by colonization and romanticizing the survival of colonial rule.[56]

Han and *minjoksung* both reflect the desire to claim irrefutable conceptions of Koreanness as a reaction to colonialism. Evidenced by the various historic accounts I have laid out so far, the reality is that our understanding of Korean as a singular ethnic entity was constructed to justify colonization. *Minjoksung* and *han* continue this singularity as a means to hastily fortify Koreanness and encourage ethnic empowerment, at the expense of continuing the same colonial logics that were used to reduce and dehumanize Koreans. That there is an ultimate, deeply rooted essence to Korean people and our history provides a misleading sense of clarity, which rejects colonialism and rootlessness as a relevant concerns of the present. This explains why the rise of concepts like *minjoksung* and *han* paralleled the myth of American exceptionalism taking hold as the mainstream historic narrative post-1945. It is more convenient to avoid seeing the U.S. political influence as a continuation of colonialism when the ideas of *minjoksung* and *han* are so entrenched in memorializing and having withstood colonialization.

Even though irrefutable constructs such as *minjoksung* and *han* seeks to define the entire Korean ethnic group, its singularity of concept creates a Koreanness that feels exclusive especially to those who were not enculturated within Korea. In my lived experience, these constructs defined how I *should* think and behave in order to be considered fully Korean, rather than providing an unconditional sense of belonging as they conceptually posit to be. Koreanness was positioned as immutable, and as the mutable subject, I was expected to adapt to Koreanness. The fact that I was educated in international schools under British and American curriculums, from the time my family emigrated, was often used to justify why I did not adapt to a fuller understanding of Korean

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[56] JooYoung Bae, "A Study of the Formation of Nation after the Nation Liberation in 1945," *Korean Contemporary Humanities Research* 13 (2003): 269–98.

constructs like *minjoksung* and *han* within my own conception of selfhood. My questioning
of Koreanness was often dismissed or explained away by my exposure to what was broadly
referred to as Western (*seoyang* in Korean) ideologies. Constructs of ethnocentric
singularity necessitated Koreanness to be distinct from the so-called West, as well as the
neighboring cultures of China and Japan. Therefore, my time spent living outside of Korea
was often used to relegate my experience of rootlessness and sense of selfhood to be not
truly Korean, especially when the way I spoke and behaved challenged the singularity of
Koreanness. My experience provides evidence that labels such as *jewuegukmin* (abroad
citizen) and *dongpo* (of the same), which extended *hanminjok* (Korean peoplehood) to all
Koreans no matter our place of living, only work to enforce sameness across ethnic
Koreans, rather than acknowledging differences within our varied lived experiences as part
of Koreanness.

In contrast, embracing rootlessness as a feature of Koreanness acknowledges the
destabilizing impact colonialism had, and continues to have, on Korean culture in a way that
opens Koreanness up to complexity, multiplicity, and paradoxes. This undermines the
singularity of colonial logics. When Koreanness values rootlessness, it is constantly
questioned and contested. Koreanness becomes endlessly negotiable and changeable, and
therefore an active conceptual participant in one's experience of assimilation. This in turn
allows for my own experience of rootlessness to be understood as an experience that
exemplifies contemporary Koreanness, rather than one that is exempt from it. By embracing
rootlessness, Koreanness is conceptually aligned with my reclamation of assimilation and
practice of Group Listening—all three are changing, endless processes. It then becomes
understandable why categorical attributions of Koreanness and Korean identity, such as
Korean music, are so difficult to define.

2.4.3 The Rootlessness of Korean Music

Any attempt to define Korean music reveals rootlessness as a core concern of Korean Music. Scholar Choi YooJun summarizes one instance where rootlessness is apparent in the labeling of what should be considered Korean music. Citing musicologist Hong Jung Soo, Choi outlines one particular conundrum among Korean music scholars:

> If someone says their research focus is in *pansori* [a form of Korean traditional vocal music]*,* then a Korean musicologist most likely would not hesitate to say define this research focus as "Korean musicology." However, the same interaction with Western scholars would likely result in their defining the *pansori* research as "ethnomusicology." The probability of a Korean scholar claiming *pansori* research as "ethnomusicology" is slim. However, if someone said their research focus was in Korean piano music, the definitions would be more divisive. Some would probably still claim this research is "Korean musicology" while others might claim it is "Western musicology."[57]

The struggle to draw clear boundaries and definitions is a feature of rootlessness, which is captured within this example of Korean piano music being identifiable both as Western and Korean.

As in *minjoksung* and *han,* attempts to reject rootlessness within the definition of Korean music had resulted in rigid, categorical boundaries especially during the 1980s and 1990s.[58] For instance, in 1980 scholar Lee Kang Suk argued for designating Korean musical practices from the Joseon dynasty and prior (pre-colonial) as "real (*jin*) Korean music" and Western music practices performed, composed, or produced by Koreans as "quasi (*jun*)

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[57] Yoo Jun Choi, "Korean Music and Asian Sympathy: Post-Nationalist Musical Discourse and 'Asia as Method,'" *Korean Society for Music Research* 19, no. 2 (2011): 7–36. See also JungSoo Hong, "Ethnomusicology, Korean Musicology, Musicology:," *Western Musicology* 4 (2001): 79–81.

[58] Yoo Jun Choi, "Korean Music and Asian Sympathy: Post-Nationalist Musical Discourse and 'Asia as Method.'"

Korean music." [59] Lee claimed to observe an erasure of Korean music: real Korean music

was made for the past, and contemporary musical practices in Korea could not escape the

influence of Western practices, resulting in a clear absence of music practices that are both

"Real Korean music" and made for contemporary Koreans.[60] Interestingly, Lee's observation

acknowledges the presence of rootlessness within Korean music by addressing the

irreparable loss of belonging and relevance of real Korean music.

Lee's argument of erasure also implies that solely replicating pre-colonial music

practices for contemporary Koreans to hear does not make them alive. Lee's frustration

points to the uprooting effects of colonialism and modernity. Because music is culturally

situated, music practices do not carry the same meaning and power even when the same

sounds and aesthetics are reproduced at a different cultural time and place. For example,

court music (*goongjungak*) during the Joseon dynasty accompanied various rituals that

were performed for the royal family (for instance, a ceremony for the death of a King).

When Japanese empire colonized Korea in 1910 and claimed military dictatorship as the

main government power over Korea, the meaning of royalty lost significance. The

subsequent neocolonial nation-building ensured that pre-colonial rituals and ceremonies in

which musical practices lived remained stripped of their sociopolitical relevance. Central to

Lee's argument is problematizing this stripping of cultural context and stagnation of

meaning-making. Pre-colonial musical practices that acquired meaning within

ritual/ceremonial social context are instead presented under the norms of modernity:

staged and appreciated within Kantian notions of aesthetics and beauty.[61]

However, acknowledging rootlessness is different from valuing rootlessness. Lee's

definition is still a conceptual rejection of rootlessness because it asserts that Korean

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[59] Yoo Jun Choi, 19.
[60] Yoo Jun Choi, 19.
[61] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

music's real essence can be located by reaching past colonialism and modernity's influence on Korean culture. Lee fails to recognize that his own rigid definition of what should and should not be considered "real Korean music" dooms real Korean music from ever existing for contemporary Korean people. Instead of understanding colonialism, modernity, and rootlessness as real Korean experiences, Lee gravitates towards romanticizing a construct of pre-colonial purity that is reminiscent of *minjoksung*.

Valuing rootlessness within Korean music frees Korean music from the burden of authenticity—there is no such thing as being real or quasi Korean music, nor more or less Korean. If authenticity "prescribes that one must equal only oneself and define oneself only through oneself," then finding meaning within rootlessness induces a permeability to any notion of oneself, such that the self becomes vulnerable to change.[62] Removing the burden of authenticity allows for a more playful and experimental way of thinking about the self. When applied to Korean music, this removes the weight of Korean music to solely be defined by what should be considered purely Korean, thereby making space for the various types of musical practices (no matter their influence) that Korean communities globally, and people living in Korea (ethnic Koreans or not), are engaging with today. Under this revised conception of Koreanness, what makes a musical practice Korean is always open to questioning; asserting Koreanness becomes a process of critical discourse and curiosity.

Removing the burden of authenticity appears as a major theme within the practice of Group Listening as well. Musicians question whether performance in the context of Group Listening is a performance of oneself that represents oneself, or a performance of a role. For example, I might reflect on whether I am performing as myself when playing my instrument. The desire to perform within an authentic sense of self is challenged when practicing Group Listening because musicians are tasked to do various activities that

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[62] Byung-Chul Han, *The Expulsion of the Other* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).

obscure the boundaries of performing oneself and performing a role. As Consensus members learned to appreciate the assimilatory process itself and value the emotional premise of rootlessness, searching for authenticity was rendered unimportant, and performing within a constant state of assimilation became more familiar. This parallels the way rootlessness provides an alternate way of being for Koreanness.

2.4.4 Using Rootlessness to Make a Home for Group Listening Within Koreanness

Composer and scholar Sandeep Bhagwati writes that there should "in principle be a sanctuary for everyone" (2007, 5-6). Bhagwati suggests that this universal morality relates to how we (humankind) need places "that make us feel inside."[63] It is this need and desire for sanctuary that I hope to address when I argue for rootlessness and Group Listening to be included within the narrative of Koreanness. An effective strategy could involve rethinking and reclaiming *han,* one of the constructs of Koreanness I critiqued for rejecting rootlessness, into a concept that can house both rootlessness and Group Listening. Unlike *minjoksung,* which imposes a descriptive quality on Korean peoplehood that pushes towards a strict definition and identification within the function of the word, *han* is an affect. Therefore, *han* can be reclaimed to represent a wider ranging "grief of historical memory" than its mainstream use has been thus far.[64] *Han* that is ever-changing based on how the Korean experience changes and diversifies can build a sense of Korean identity that is not biologistic or ethnocentric, but rather open to the multiplicities of the Korean experience.

Kim's 2017 paper already provides the foundation for this reclamation by eschewing biologistic notions of *han* but seeing the value of *han* as "the word for sorrow in reaction to historical injustice against those who identify as Korean." *Han* already has the widespread influence to remind Korean people of a "specific history *we should not forget*."[65] By

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[63] Sandeep Bhagwati, "Composing One's Home: Strategies for the Identity-Challenged" (lecture, The Defiant Imagination, Montreal, Feb 1, 2007).
[64] Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of '"The Beauty of Sorrow."'"
[65] Kim.

historicizing rootlessness within (neo)colonialism's continued impact on Korea's sociopolitical and cultural reality, I ensure that we are remembering an accurate history which reckons with rootlessness instead of a convenient narrative that denies its relevance. Simultaneously, the experience of *han* must be correctly understood as *not* unique to the Korean people. Intergenerational trauma due to (neo)colonialism exists in many different cultures; while the specific impacts and manifestations are varied, the affective results can be similar.[66] Leaning into this similarity, as opposed to imposing a Korean exclusivity, provides a strategy for building solidarity. As Kim states, "interethnic discourse of *han* is an example of how racial identification can be an expression of mourning and solidarity, even as it continues to evolve from its origin as a biologistic racial colonial construct."[67] Identifying in this way with *han* provides an affective focal point for mutual understanding even with significant differences such as temporality, context, and place.

Rootlessness can be considered one of many conditions which produces the affect of *han.*[68] Rootlessness is crucially embedded within our "grief of historical memory" because tracing the reasons for my own rootlessness led me directly to an integral history of neocolonialism in Korea. *Han* as a product of rootlessness illuminates the connection between parts of my personal and creative inquiry I previously thought were distant, unrelated topics. Take for instance, my transient lived experience, my desire to experimentally design rehearsals (Group Listening), and my resistance to rigid definitions of Koreanness and Korean music: all three share the grief of fractured identity amongst globalized modernity, and can be housed together within this reclaimed notion of *han.* Doing

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[66] A meaningful parallel is how bell hooks reclaims agrarian identity within Blackness. See bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

[67] Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of '"The Beauty of Sorrow."'"

[68] The way I situate rootlessness as a condition that can produce *han* as an affect is modeled after the way Yael Navaro argues that specific frames of affect can emerge from her own fieldwork. While a deeper discussion of affect theory is not appropriate for the scope of this dissertation, the discussion of rootlessness and *han* necessitates a basic framework. See Yael Navaro, "Diversifying Affect," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2017): 209–14, https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.2.05.

so empowers and enables me to relate to Koreanness, and I become an active participant in the ways Koreanness exists.

Group Listening is one example of how I have approached rootlessness as a means to its own resolution, and thus an expression of *han.* Rootlessness provokes a desire for belonging, while simultaneously providing freedom from identification. This emotional ambivalence explains both how I reclaimed *han* in order to house myself within a revised concept of Koreanness, and why I wanted to devise a practice like Group Listening. As I have done with the notion of Koreanness, questioning various norms and deconstructing the unspoken rules within a rehearsal led me to Group Listening: the rehearsal process itself became the site of experimentation. It is only within the context of rootlessness, and the revised understanding of *han* and Koreanness, that I assert Group Listening as Korean music. Just as *han* can be revised to be a Korean affect that is not unique of Koreans, Group Listening can be considered Korean music, without being uniquely Korean. Aside from myself, the musicians of Ensemble Consensus who co-created and developed Group Listening projects are not Koreans. The Koreanness of Group Listening therefore comes from how I have traced my own rootlessness and assimilatory experiences to Korean identity formation. For other members of Consensus, Group Listening evoked their own experiences with assimilation and rootlessness in contexts that were unrelated to Koreanness. Under the revised conception of an unexclusive Koreanness, there is no conflict that arises from this apparent duality.

Valuing rootlessness is the ability to find meaning in perpetual change. Perpetual change is central to the practice of Group Listening and the cultural reality of Koreanness. In Group Listening, rehearsal is not a means to an end artistic goal. Rehearsal is the creative practice. Rehearsal without an end goal means enacting perpetual adjustments to the music being performed for the sake of experiencing change. In Koreanness, the notion of endless change liberates Koreanness from definition, as definition seeks constancy. An

indefinite Koreanness allows for questions and contradictions, while appreciating the various evolutions of how Koreanness has been expressed or may be expressed in the future.

2.5 Conclusion

The writing of this chapter is in and of itself, an exercise in assimilation. In order for me and my creative practice to exist more comfortably within Koreanness, I shifted and negotiated the boundaries of existing ideas of Koreanness to include and value rootlessness. It is methodologically parallel to Group Listening: Consensus members shifted and negotiated relationship dynamics in order to design and enact music performances that presumed an alternative set of relational standards to those of existing music rehearsals we had experienced before. While this chapter provides a broader conceptual contextualization of Group Listening, the following chapter addresses my immediate social situation within New York City from which Group Listening came about, and the formation of Ensemble Consensus as a music collective solely dedicated to practicing Group Listening and its possibilities. I will then introduce a framework for Group Listening that identifies a set of modalities that together facilitate the musical practice.