

CFAR's *Papers on Power* is a series of commissioned essays for which artists, writers, activists, and cultural producers have been asked to respond to the question "What is power?" in whatever form best relates to their work and thinking.

MAKING AFTER MELANCHOLIA

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN GARRICK IMATANI, LYNN YARNE, AND LU YIM

This public conversation was held on April 18, 2021 in conjunction with Garrick Imatani's CFAR exhibition, *monologue*. The artists discussed the nuanced ways in which their identity figures into their work—looking at compounded layers of representation, cultural expectation vs. lived experience, and the futuristic contexts in which their work as Asian American makers might be seen in the midst of increased national violence. The following excerpts have been edited for clarity, length and readability.

Garrick Imatani: I struggle to define what making for myself means and distinguishing that from making for an audience, which in nearly all instances approaches the work from a position that makes my narrative non-dominant.

So, over a century ago now, W.E.B Du Bois talked about this as a double consciousness: where I have this self-consciousness of an interior world or how I might appear to my family, loved ones, or those within my community who I really trust, and then a consciousness that responds to a constructed version of myself or how I might be viewed within white culture.

And I love how Tony Morrison responds to this dilemma. Often times, she actually speaks directly to Du Bois and describes how she liberates herself from the white male gaze in her writing, or tries to not let this be an entry point to the work. And so I'm wondering of Lu and Lynn, how do you deal with this dilemma in your own work? Or do you feel similar to Morrison, that you're able to liberate yourself and make work that doesn't account for that gaze?

Lynn Yarne: When I first started making the series of work that I'm making, it was supposed to be installed in the Chinatown Museum in Portland, which is in Old Town (a historical center for the Asian community). When I was thinking about who would be coming there, I wasn't making it for myself, but I thought, "Oh, I'm going to make these works for this historical community and people who are going to understand this history." But, I didn't think that when I started showing the work in other spaces; it just comes across as dignity porn. I don't think other people really understand or see it in the same way. So when I'm making things for new spaces without those shared histories, I do hold that anxiety a lot. I really struggle with how people are going to see it in different spaces outside of that trusted community.

Lu Yim: That anxiety I have experienced as well. It's making me think how when we make work and show it, how that place and how we are in that place to ourselves is vulnerable to that gaze. Perhaps that is creating that anxiety. And that's not something that we can control. There were times when I've made work, where I have really considered what that gaze is.

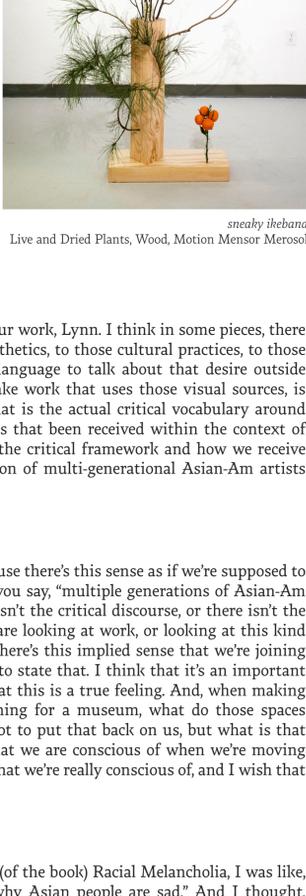
I was just talking to Taka Yamamoto, who shared with me this writing he had done when I made a project, *Light Noise*, in 2013. That whole piece was about the gaze. And, at that time, I had been trying to figure out how to navigate that, as if I had some kind of control over tricking what the viewer and how the viewer was going to perceive me and the other people who were in the work. I'll just leave that there. That double consciousness is there, and I think the relationship to it is one that I feel we could probably unpack a little bit more.

Garrick, with the work that you just created, how was it managing that for yourself in making it? And did you decide how you were going to position yourself? Did you make active decisions about navigating that?

Garrick Imatani: Navigating this idea of the double consciousness or how I might be perceived?

Lu Yim: Yeah... How you might be perceived.

Garrick Imatani: Yeah, for sure... I think in a way, this talk becomes an opportunity to ask the questions that I'm wrestling with myself and that I was certainly thinking through with this exhibition. I think making this work was in a way my attempt to try to liberate myself. Can I reach that point, as Morrison alludes to, of just escaping that gaze? What would I need to do? Perhaps make a body of work that specifically speaks to that experience.



sneaky ikebana
Live and Dried Plants, Wood, Motion Sensor Merosol

So, for those who haven't seen the show, there's a number of works that, for me, embody a kind of aesthetic that one might ascribe to Japanese heritage. You have a shoji screen work, an ikebana related sculpture. And, there's a handmade paper piece that has my mother's family mon or crest (Takahashi) used repeatedly as a symbol in it. When you walk up to this piece, a motion sensor triggers blacklight LEDs that show these frowny face emoticons inside the mons. So, somebody else's presence trips an alternative read of the work, where maybe at first it performed a cultural heritage aesthetic.

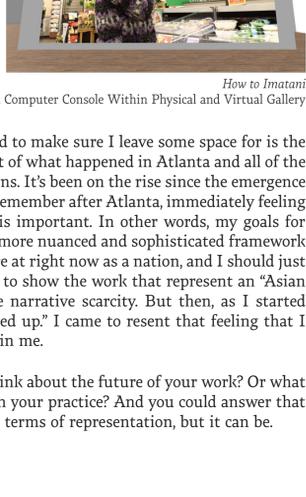
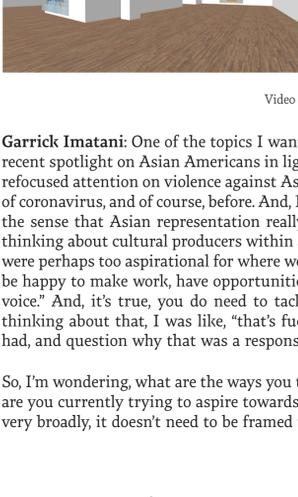
That's why I've also been so interested in your work, Lynn. I think in some pieces, there is an earnestness to connect with those aesthetics, to those cultural practices, to those iconographies. But, there may not be the language to talk about that desire outside of that framework. In other words, if I make work that uses those visual sources, is it immediately cultural heritage work? What is the actual critical vocabulary around the work? And how is it received? How has that been received within the context of contemporary art? I'm not convinced that the critical framework and how we receive it has necessarily caught up to the evolution of multi-generational Asian-Am artists making work in this way.

Lu Yim: I'm having so many emotions because there's this sense as if we're supposed to join something. I don't know, just hearing you say, "multiple generations of Asian-Am artists." That there isn't a canon and there isn't the critical discourse, or there isn't the known histories that we refer to when we are looking at work, or looking at this kind of work within the Institution of Art. So, there's this implied sense that we're joining in on something. I don't know. I just want to state that. I think that it's an important thing for people to hear and understand that this is a true feeling. And, when making something for a gallery or making something for a museum, what do those spaces mean? What exactly are we agreeing to? Not to put that back on us, but what is that sense of joining? And is that something that we are conscious of when we're moving through the world? I think it is something that we're really conscious of, and I wish that was different.

Lynn Yarne: I think when I heard the title (of the book) *Racial Melancholia*, I was like, "Oh, finally a psychoanalytic book about why Asian people are sad." And I thought, "I'm going to read this book because I need that." But then, I'm like, "I don't need these books." It's one of the only psychoanalytic texts about how we experienced race, but I feel like we have different modes of expression and everyone (here) is doing different things. I think all these activities can become my group canons.

Garrick Imatani: Mm-hmm (affirmative)...

Well, to refer back to what Lu mentioned earlier, and in the lead up conversation we had before this event, they mentioned not being a decolonized English speaker, which involves using the words: inclusion, being included, or participating. I think a number of artists of color have had that dilemma too in terms of not wanting to be a (racial) representative, but the sparse history is such that, we might be able to articulate ourselves within a particular framework that then allows us to join a different kind of conversation. Because, if you are working with community, or you're working with groups that haven't been trained that way, aren't using that specialized language, don't have that "theory," then they're not always included in those same conversations. This doesn't mean there's no legitimacy to an academic or intellectual, professionalized field of art. But, at the same time, you really do have to go through that training or go through that exposure in order to participate in that conversation.



Asians in the Club
Handmade Paper, Motion Sensor, Blacklight LEDs, Invisible Ink

Garrick Imatani: So, I did want to ask and talk a little bit about humor, and how oftentimes artists, comedians, and others use it as a way to process things. In the case of the exhibition, there's this humorous video that I made that in many ways is very tragic. In it, a mutual friend was kind enough to participate in the video, but really hated saying the lines and had a lot of problems with them in terms of the ideas they constituted, such as a negation of self. They really struggled to be a part of that (depiction).

So I'm curious about humor, Lynn, and whether or not that enters your work? Or, how you think about humor, and some of the ways that may play into earlier conversations we've had around processing race and representation.

Lynn Yarne: For my work, I don't know that humor is as big of an element as levity. I've been making collages recently and I really like that they're flat. I want them to be 10 to 30 second GIFs, something a little bit flimsy, but super meaningful to me. That's funny. For me, I'm wondering about the surface level of how I'm representing and who I'm representing to; levity is a little bit of an escape route, not super serious and two seconds long.

Garrick, I think your show was really funny. When you said that the ikebana piece is for cats, I thought that was super funny. I was curious, since there are pranks (in the exhibition), if you see humor as a power play or type of power?

Garrick Imatani: I've said it before that power prefers suffering subjects. And, that's why I raised this text by David Eng and Shinhee Han, which is about racial melancholia. In it, they talk about identity formation for Asian Americans, and their inability to fully integrate or assimilate into the American Project, which leads to a racial melancholia (for my generation). I love the research, I find it very convincing, and yet, there's a part about me that just doesn't want to center an ontology on loss. So I think, in many ways, starting is a kind of resistance to thinking about oneself as having a (psychoanalytic) humor point that begins there.

At the same time, it's complicated because Lu made the very good point (in an earlier conversation) that not allowing space for trauma and healing within identity formation is inherently misogynistic. And these issues are not only important subjects to creatively explore; they're incredibly powerful. So I'm struggling with those two perspectives.

Ultimately, I want to counter the idea of putting a kind of disenfranchisement as the main *modus operandi* to make creative work, even if it's true, or even if I feel it at times. I don't know if there's anything in there that resonates with you two?

Lu Yim: Yeah. When I'm thinking about humor, and thinking about your work, if we think of them as pranks, so much of the work has to do with someone's physical presence activating the sculptures. And there's something about that that does feel very connected to pain, and that it's igniting an immediate, physical response. It's making us aware of our physical bodies in that room with the work, becoming present. Which feels like a counter to maybe a more dissociative space, where you're like, "I'm not here, I'm not there, I'm somewhere in the loss." I don't know. That might be a stretch, but that's just what is making me think about the beauty of humor in relation to this pain and sadness—its ability to bring us back into the surface of ourselves. And that feels powerful to me.

Lynn Yarne: In Garrick's work, things are moving, everything's triggered by movement and the sculptures move, but Lu, you're very present and physical in the work that you do. As you were speaking to pain and presence, how do you see those things in your work?

Lu Yim: All of it feels very present all the time for me. I think that is largely what my work centers around, even if it might not be stated as such. Moving and performing for me is about being in my body with the things, even if I think of not being in my body as a form of embodiment. It's a way for me to reorient myself actually. And I do use humor in my work, because at a certain point, I think I get to a place where there's something. Something occurs when making, when playing around in the studio...there's a crack just so absurd about being in my body and moving around in a room. And then to think about doing that in front of people. I think I laugh a lot at myself, so I do put that in my work.

Garrick Imatani: Lynn, Lu and I were struck when you mentioned an earlier project based around children's songs. Could you speak a little bit about that?

Lynn Yarne: It was a proposal that never really got accepted. When Lu was talking earlier (before this event) about how racism can travel, I thought a lot about how it also travels in songs, in play, or in humor. In how we have fun or how we laugh at things, which is a power dynamic. So, I think my initial proposal was to do history rewrites with children's songs, mostly jump rope songs so that I could incorporate some, and learn how to jump rope. I was also thinking of it in relation to who gets to be funny? And Asians, like Pat Morita, Mr. Miyagi from Karate Kid, he was a standup comedian. But he's not very funny in the movies. I learned recently that Steven Yeun was a standup comedian too. But a lot of times we don't really get to be funny, we just get to be the jokes of things.

How to Imatani
Video on Computer Console Within Physical and Virtual Gallery

Garrick Imatani: One of the topics I wanted to make sure I leave some space for is the recent spotlight on Asian Americans in light of what happened in Atlanta and all of the refocused attention on violence against Asians. It's been on the rise since the emergence of coronavirus, and of course, before. And, I remember after Atlanta, immediately feeling the sense that Asian representation really is important. In other words, my goals for thinking about cultural producers within a more nuanced and sophisticated framework were perhaps too aspirational for where we're at right now as a nation, and I should just be happy to make work, have opportunities to show the work that represent an "Asian voice." And, it's true, you do need to tackle narrative scarcity. But then, as I started thinking about that, I was like, "that's fucked up." I came to resent that feeling that I had, and question why that was a response in me.

So, I'm wondering, what are the ways you think about the future of your work? Or what are you currently trying to aspire towards in your practice? And you could answer that very broadly, it doesn't need to be framed in terms of representation, but it can be.

Lynn Yarne: Lu, go for it.

Lu Yim: I was like, "Lynn, Lynn, Lynn." ...Future, I don't know if I have an answer to that, the future. I think right now, I do think that "representation" is important. I think that, ideas about who Asians are, and what they look like, and how they act in the consciousness of this country is unfortunate. And, that there's a lot of work to be done there. And I feel like I have been for a while just moving through it, moving with it. And now, I feel a lot more anger, I feel a lot more irate, because of what's happening right now. I feel used. I feel that what's happening in terms of the hashtag is dangerous. I think we're being used to actually further the project of anti-Blackness and white supremacy yet again. It feels really bad.

So I don't know what that means in terms of my work, other than what I know to be true about having this creative practice that I have, and the community that I have, and relationships that I have, is that there is a sacred space that I believe is important to maintain, for mental health, for connection with other people, and for also the resistance towards a flattening of who I might be. So I hope that those things are contributing in some way in that line of work and practice.

Garrick Imatani: I have many thoughts about that, but I want to give some space for Lynn to respond.

Lynn Yarne: Maybe I'm still thinking, what are your thoughts on what Lu said?

Garrick Imatani: Just "furthering the project of anti-Blackness." We had texted earlier about how heartbreaking it is to see this sensationalized violence, particularly of people of color against other people of color. So that's immediately what I thought about. Were you also referring to the model minority sensibility, in terms of furthering that project?

Lu Yim: Yeah.

Garrick Imatani: Okay. Which, if others aren't fully aware, that stereotype (of the model minority) in many ways was an intentional way to delegitimize not just the activism taking place amongst very active Asian-Americans in solidarity with other people of color but was used specifically to hold it up as a candle to other racialized groups. "This is the model minority, follow in line and good things will come to you." So those are the two things that I immediately thought about when you were saying that. Is that what you're thinking about when you say that?

Lu Yim: Yeah, I'm thinking about that for sure. The model minority is just one example I think of how Asians in this country have been utilized as a step stool. Just historically, if you look at Chinese railroad workers and that history of immigration, exploitation, and perception, and then, just all the war that's happened over our lifetimes. It's not just a myth, right? I mean, there's other myths—that's this surge in violence and being scapegoated at the beginning of the pandemic.

All of these things are already in place. They're already in place so it's easy for them to be recalled or pulled back forward at the expense of our bodies. I think that's what I'm thinking of; thinking about whiteness as a concept, and how these concepts are then used to create some distortion.

Garrick Imatani: It definitely seems like it's a model when it's serving the American project, and then when it's not, it's the perpetual enemy or foreigner invading. You see this really deep sense of xenophobia come to the surface, and it's still serving the same project, right?

Lu Yim: Yeah, yeah. Lynn, did you want to respond to the initial question? I know that that was a large thing to inject into the room.

Lynn Yarne: But a good thing... And I felt really saturated in the feelings about anti-Blackness and being used for that cause. For example, the over representation of Black people attacking Asians versus the actual reported numbers of how many Black people that are attacking Asians are very disproportionate.

I also thought a lot about Indianapolis and the recent mass shooting. I didn't know that it was an Asian mass shooting that it was Sikh people. It wasn't an East Asian mass shooting, and I'm not hearing about it as much, or it's not really on my feeds. It's not anti-Blackness, but it feels bad. I have thoughts on Asian America that are exciting, but in relating to loss and gains, I do feel really saturated in loss.

Reference:

David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Disassociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

Biography:

Garrick Imatani is an artist who uses performance, functional objects, or interaction to bring people into their own body and subject. Working in sculpture, photography, video and installation, recent projects focus on reimagining racialized historical erasures into more believable and inspired futures. Past works have included collaborating with illegally-surveilled activists to readjust city archives, re-enacting labor on the transcontinental railroad, and working with members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde to replicate their sacred meteorite held in the American Museum of Natural History.

Lynn Yarne is an artist and educator from Portland, Oregon. She works within animation and collage to address collective memory, generational narratives, histories and space. A fourth generation Chinese and Japanese American, her current work explores themes of displacement and loss, resilience and community, particularly within Old Town Portland. She is curious about participatory works, magic, and rejuvenation.

Lu Yim is a movement based artist and teacher. Yim is a co-organizer of Physical Education (PE) and Pizán Club, two artist-for-artist run groups based in Portland, OR. Currently they are an Artist-in-Residence at Center for Performance Research (Brooklyn, NY).