The Sound of What Becomes Possible: Language Politics and Jesse Chun's ?? SULLAE (2020)

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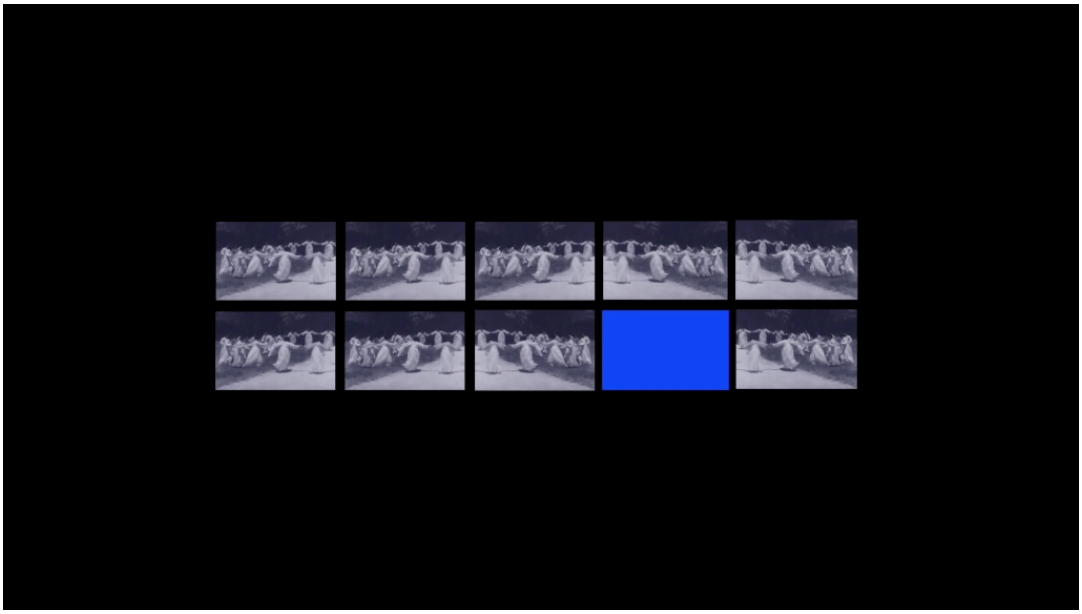
Abstract

Language can be a site of loss, a wholeness with which one, due to migration, has never really known. In the above passage, artist, Jesse Chun, reflects on how her grandmother spoke words in a language she did not understand, but yearned to hear and feel those sounds after her passing. There is a sonic residue that sticks to diasporic experiences.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Dance/Movement, Diasporic Sound, Digital Media



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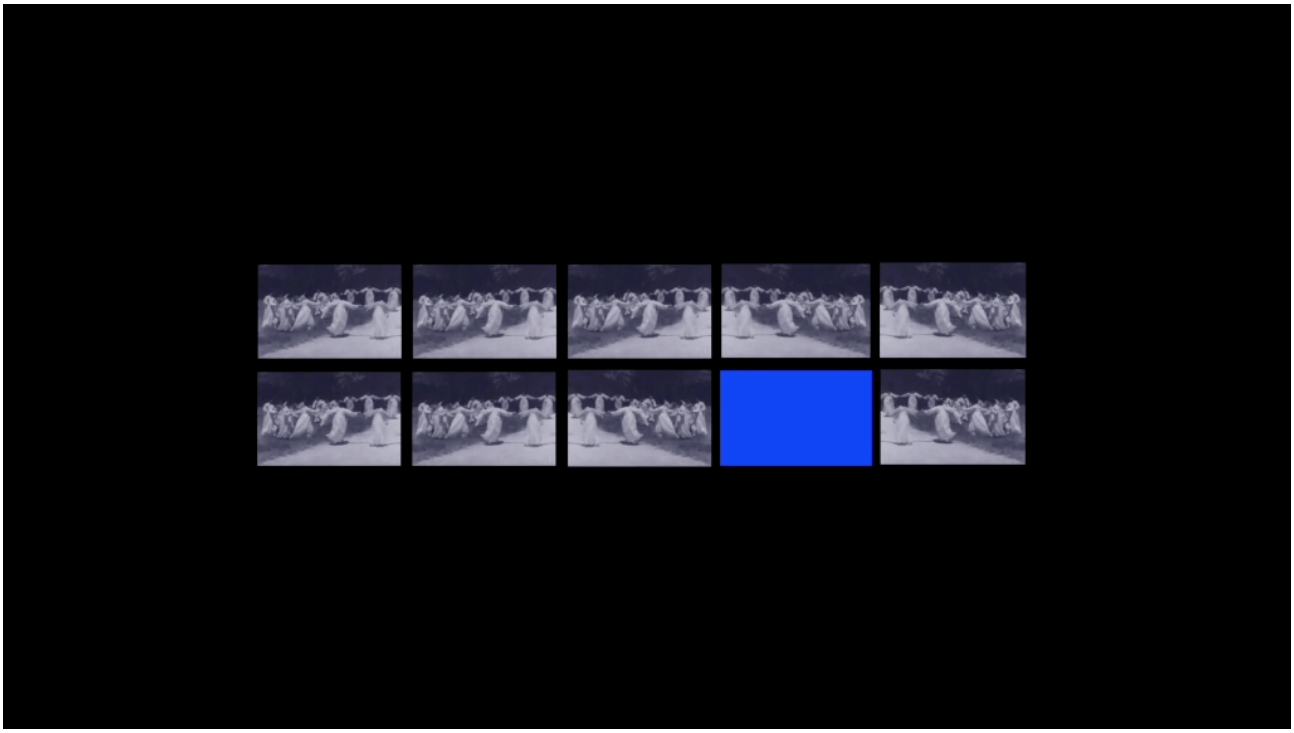


> *"To this day I think about all the strange words I missed out on, all the losses I'm still carrying from faraway...I still think of the time when I spoke one language, and that language was whole."*
>
> *Chun 2020*

Language can be a site of loss, a wholeness with which one, due to migration, has never really known. In the above passage, artist, Jesse Chun, reflects on how her grandmother spoke words in a language she did not understand, but yearned to hear and feel those sounds after her passing. There is a sonic residue that sticks to diasporic experiences. There are sounds that can stir up a blend of affect and ideation that is comforting when whiteness is unsettling. It is this disjuncture between words, meaning, and their sounds, that drew me to Chun's work, ??SULLAE (2020). This piece reminded me of how sound, in its most ambiguous and queer forms, can hold the contingencies of history, language, memory, family, and the genealogies of loss that mark these sites of colonial dispossession.

??SULLAE (2020) is a single channeled video that draws from ganggang sullae, a Korean seasonal harvest and fertility ritual that integrates song and dance and is typically performed by women under the glow of moonlight. The participants hold hands forming a circle that through their movement, expands, disassembles, and changes its form. The songs can be both impromptu or pre-determined and encourages the participants to express their feelings in chorus with one another.

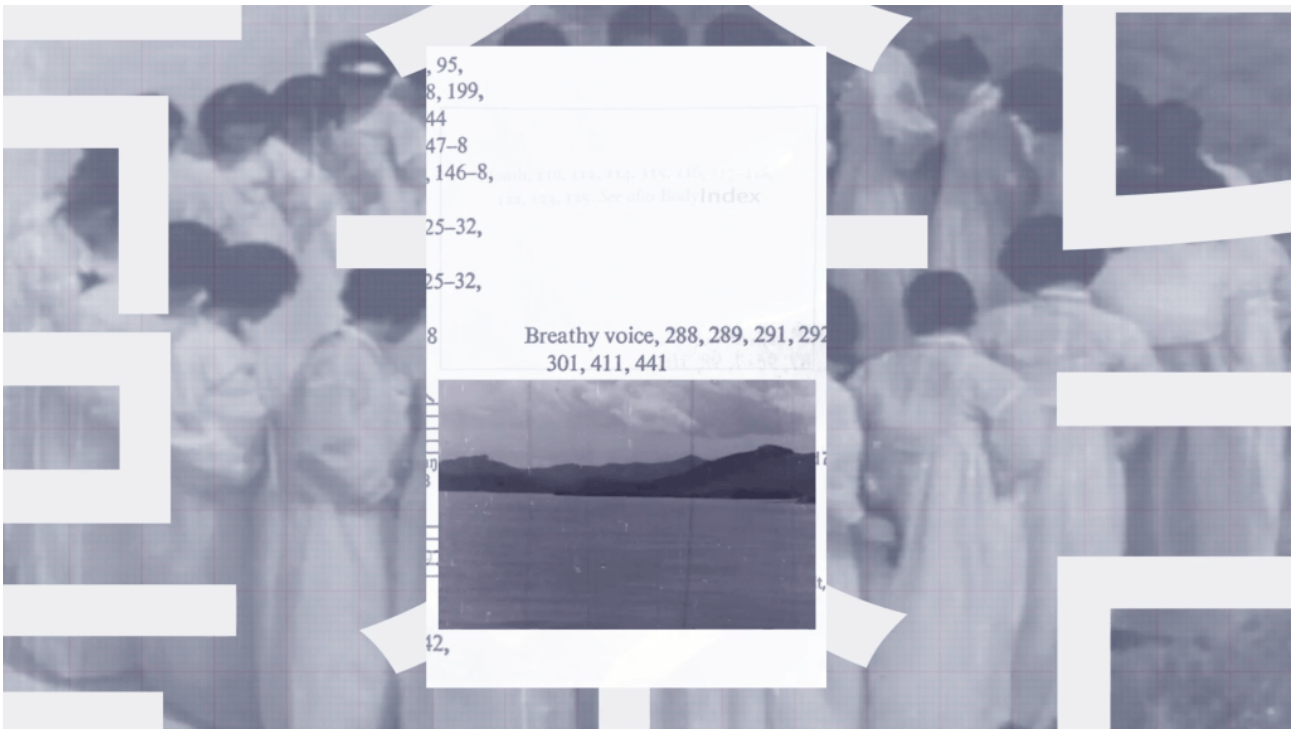


https://youtu.be/6D73WBzzEG4

Video made by the Cultural Heritage Administration of the Republic of Korea (2008) for UNESCO "intangible heritage" application

Diana Seo Hyung Lee (2020) suggests that historically ganggang sullae was meant to provide a forum for its participants to express emotions connected to living within patriarchal systems of power and oppression. She writes: "the women participating would not have been able to, in their everyday lives, sing, speak loudly, nor leave the house at night, in the patriarchal society of ancient Korea. This dance was a license for their one release." In 깡깡*SULLAE,* the dance proves to be a defiant presence. The women flash on screen as an unbreakable chain reinscribing a gendered history with new sounds and images that gesture to emancipatory possibilities.

깡깡*SULLAE* combines archival clips of ganggang sullae, index pages from intonation books, images of Hangul and English consonants and audio splices from YouTube tutorials on how to pronounce English correctly. In the video, language becomes unhinged from expectation but at the same time, given form through history. The sound of the English language is disembodied and spliced into phonemic pulses. In 깡깡*SULLAE*, Chun has created an encounter with the grammars of polyphony; a simultaneity of sounds that are both restrained by and resistant to the imposition of English on the Korean diaspora. Through what Chun has described as a form of "unlanguaging" following Rey Chow, her audience is witness to new meanings produced through the abstraction, manipulation, and redaction of sounds and symbols from the English language.



Still from ??SULLAE (2020), courtesy of the artist

Chun's editing and manipulation of English sounds is intentional. In an interview with *Art Forum*, Chun shares: "Taking the sound apart but still keeping it within the conceptual framework of English made me think about what else is embedded in making a language. English is tied up with legacies of imperialism; there's so much unseen violence that is part of how this language is institutionalized." What remains after the edits is an inventory of sounds that disrupts the primacy of the vowel as central to English word construction and thus, central to colonial imagination.

Like Chun, I realize that my conceptualizing of language is within an English framework, but my hope is that when we turn to the affective and when we begin to pull language a part, something different, something resistant, is produced. I am neither an expert in English nor Korean linguistics, it was the sounds in this work that pulled me into it. In thinking with ??*SULLAE*, I'm interested in what becomes possible in the absence of the vowel. I turn to the interruptive potential of consonant sounds to affect and incite methods of communication outside of those steeped in colonial dominance. What does it mean to de-emphasize the function of vowel sounds in language and reorient our listening to the consonant? What do consonant sounds teach us about the sonics of race that underwrite hierarchies of language? What methods of communication become possible when we do away with words and are left with only their sonic substance?

https://vimeo.com/603269567

??*SULLAE 3-channel excerpt*

Through her assemblage of consonant sounds in ??*SULLAE*, Chun is making a deliberate choice to describe and animate a politics of language through refusing its colonial enclosures and turning to the aesthetic in order hold the excesses of description. She refuses the vowel in this piece, not by denying its presence, but instead relegating it to the soundless and the unfamiliar, a space of,

in her words, "untranslatability." In this undoing, consonants become the emotive force where new meanings and orientations to the sounds that mark our words are forged.

ㅆㅆ*SULLAE* opens with the sound *ssshhh;* a pairing of consonant sounds that is often associated with insisting on silence, a sound meant to reprimand. Chun extracts and emplaces this sound in a new aesthetic landscape that is independent and unregulated by colonial schemas of enunciation and translation. The prominent soundscapes of the video are consonant sounds and when removed from their phonetic relations to vowels these sounds undo the presumptive structuring or potential reprimand of English. In ㅆㅆ*SULLAE*, we are meant to experience the fullness of the consonants' timbre...*ssshhh, ppp, ddd, tttt, kkkk*...these edited clips of sound originally meant to instruct and assimilate speech into English pronunciations now serve a different function. For me, they secure Chun's political orientation: one that is about the crafting of a world that involves the careful consideration of the logistics, function, and embedded emotions of the sounds that inhabit it.

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score (for unlanguaging), 2020
graphite, watermarks, paper, aluminum frame, 13 x 16 inches

All languages contain their own unique set of vowels and consonants, but, Anne Carson reminds us that: "The importance of vowels to human speech has remained. There are words in English without consonants, but so central are vowels to word construction that there isn't a word in

English that doesn't include a vowel." In speech, consonants sounds are meant to break up the intended agenda of vowels. The ssshhh, ppp, ddd, tttt, kkkk, are antithetical to the circle or the rounded mouth needed to voice a vowel sound. Unlike the openness of a vowel, producing consonant sounds involves a narrowing of the vocal tract. This narrowing is referred to as constriction or the obstruction of breath whereby sound is produced by a form of corporeal tension. Consonant sounds also demand all the mechanics of the mouth: the lips, the teeth, the tongue, and the palette. Shhhh, requires the corners of the lips to lower and rather than rounding, the lips become pursed, and teeth become exposed. Parts of the mouth are drawn in. The soft palate is raised, and the tongue reaches upwards towards the roof of the mouth without touching it and then the tip of the tongue lowers behind the teeth.

Consonants emerge out of collectivity. Where a vowel is sounded without vocal constraint, consonants require more effort. Their sounds are produced through intricate bodily choreographies in the mouth that involve both constriction and collaboration. Ganggangsullae likewise relies on effort and interdependence. Participants collectively determine the speed and/or shape of their dance. They may even become serpentine or separate into smaller circles depending on what the group decides. The dance also provides an aesthetic space for its participants to voice frustration, anger, and tension through song with the hopes of producing reprieve from gendered hardships. Chun has decided to withhold these songs from her audience; we never hear the women singing. Through this erasure, Chun embeds the consonant sound with affective force whereby a politics of language and gendered presence is enunciated through and beyond a form of silencing. The dance redirects trajectories of dominance whereby the shushing takes on a new voice imbued with agency and hope. Because of how Chun isolates and amplifies its sound, ssshhhh is free to take on different meanings and associations. For me, I was reminded of rushing water or gusts of wind, or the sound used to lull my child to sleep. I was brought into another index of knowing and relating.



깡깡SULLAE, 3-channel installation view, 2020, courtesy of the artist

The sounds of language hold erasures and layered histories often obfuscated by our mundane encounters with them. Largely understood as the most sonorous part of the syllable, vowels produce the loudest speech sounds and their capacity for holding larger amplitudes or louder volumes have been linked to the sonic expression of emotion. Consonant sounds are more pragmatic than vowels. They are known for their functionality, for the ways in which they assemble the semantic structure of words and for their capacities to hold vowels in place or as Anne Carson describes as "delineating meaning amid the flow of open vowel sounds." Consonant and vowel sounds map out different functional trajectories by virtue of the shape of mouth and orientation of breath that these sounds demand. Like Chun, I'm interested in what political orientations become possible when we source emotion elsewhere, beyond the confines of spoken words imposed upon us.

The word consonant is a noun, a word used to identify or classify, a semantic enclosure that establishes a subject or object. But unlike the word vowel, consonant is also an adjective. A consonant possesses the capacity to describe, to name, to tell us more. Adjectives parcel out description on states of being, in this way, they are inherently phenomenological. In ᄒᆞᆫ*SULLAE*, Chun empties vowels of their sonic substance leaving behind traces of fragmented characters and differently shaped circles in their wake. They are stripped of breath and their symbolic value forming a new method of communication that reroutes expectations of what language, as we know it, can do and sound like. Like, ganggang sullae, the vowel is premised on the shape of a circle, but in ᄒᆞᆫ*SULLAE*, Chun provokes us to think about what becomes possible beyond the circular structuring device, what becomes possible beyond the purview of the violent embeddedness of English and its colonial exigencies.



new moons, 2020, graphite on wall, surveillance mirror, 18 x 6 inches each
untitled (ᄒᆞᆫ), 2020, a functional concrete stool, courtesy of artist

Chun has noted that the moon that hovers above the ganggangsullae is yet another site of imperial conquest. In *Art Forum*, Chun states: "when I look up at it to feel comforted or to find

solace, I'm reminded of colonial violence and an agenda that's projected onto it. In that way, the moon also reflected how I see language." Chun's turn to consonants signals a reshaping of the colonial frame that does not disavow or idealize the legacies of imperialism on systems of communication, but instead highlights the tensions and obstructions produced in its shadows.

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Featured image: ||*SULLAE*, 2020, single-channel version, courtesy of artist

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Casey Mecija *is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication & Media Studies at York University. Her current research examines sound as a mode of affective, psychic and social representation, specifically in relation to diasporic experience. Drawing on sound studies, queer diaspora studies and Filipinx Studies, her research considers how sensorial encounters are enmeshed and disciplined by social and psychic conditions. She is also a musician and filmmaker, whose work has received a number of accolades and has been presented internationally.*

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