

Apr 6th, 3:00 PM - 3:50 PM

“The real spice girl, hot girl power”: M.I.A. Singing the Subaltern Voice in the Euro-American Soundscape

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Niehaus, Emma, "“The real spice girl, hot girl power”: M.I.A. Singing the Subaltern Voice in the Euro-American Soundscape" (2018). *Ray Browne Conference on Cultural and Critical Studies*. 10.
<https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/rbc/2018conference/005/10>

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Elizabeth Niehaus

July 17, 2017

ACS 6820

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**“The real spice girl, hot girl power”:
M.I.A. singing the subaltern voice in the Euro-American Soundscape**

Every year the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) publishes its yearly Global Music Report. The report examines several of the significant economic ins and outs of the industry including most popular recording artists, positive and negative growth for various platform revenues, countries of industrial growth, and most successful record companies. 2016’s most successful artists included Drake (first place), Adele, Beyoncé, Justin Bieber, Prince, David Bowie, and Rihanna among others. While 2016’s list of most successful artists is far more diversified demographically speaking, containing five artists of color compared to the 2015’s list which contained only two, the underlying exclusivity of the list extends far beyond the perceived ethnicities of the year’s most successful artists. Despite the publication’s title, the artists and companies rounding out the global music industry’s “top” are anything but global. The most successful artists’ record labels, and most of the artists themselves, are all either European/ North American in origin, or are companies ultimately owned by European/ American multimedia conglomerates like Time Warner (USA), Vivendi (France), and the EMI Group (UK). The fact that 2016 and numerous years preceding it witnessed mostly American and European artists and only European/ American companies doing best in a “global” music market indicates most clearly the increasing westernization of once unique national and/ or cultural

soundscapes all over the globe. With decreasing economic and cultural space left for musical diversity in the present day, the question becomes: does the subaltern musician have opportunity to contribute to this predominantly “Western” or more aptly put, “Euro-American” music scene? Can the subaltern sing?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal work of Subaltern Studies, “Can the subaltern speak?” pointed out the “Western” academy’s favoring of the Eurocentric subject and the academy’s methods of ethnography and historiography which erroneously assumed academic superiority and ultimately silenced the voices, experiences, and cultures of colonized, “third world” and non- European “others”. In the wake of Spivak’s essay followed scholarship that examined the viability of subaltern speech through different cultural manifestations. Notably, Amanda Weidman and Rebecca Romanow’s works, “Can the Subaltern Sing?” and “But... Can the Subaltern Sing?” respectively, investigated Subaltern speech and subjective experience as it was expressed through music. Following Weidman’s examination of how language is used to express subjectivity in music, Romanow begged the question, “Is there even room for the subaltern’s musical voice in the global music industry?” The following essay will expand upon Spivak and subsequently Weidman and Romanow’s questions by examining a single example of subaltern music within the ever increasing Euro- American soundscape.

Ultimately, I argue that it is not a question of *if* the Subaltern can sing or not. Subalterns and subaltern citizens “sing” every day, contributing their voices and experiences to the overall Euro-American soundscape (both marginal and mainstream). Rather, the real question in this ever growing Euro-American musical soundscape is: how is the subaltern heard? How does a listener whose “ear,” so to speak, has been either acclimatized to the Euro-American (“Western”)

soundscape or exposed almost exclusively to the Euro-American soundscape interpret a subaltern musical voice as it is sounded within a westernized aural climate?

Because a thorough examination of how the subaltern is heard within the growing, arguably global, Euro-American soundscape is too great for the confines of this essay, I have chosen to focus my analysis on a specific subaltern artist who is currently participating within the Euro-American soundscape, the British artist of Sri Lankan Tamil origin, the artist Mathangi Arulpragasam, stage name M.I.A. Mainly, I focus on how her music (her subaltern voice) is heard and can be meaningfully interpreted by listeners within the Euro-American soundscape. I embellish my analysis of her subaltern musical voice with what I have termed a “phenomenological listening interview” that documents a single listener’s subjective hearing of one of M.I.A.’s songs. I then analytically extract significant listening phenomena or aural messages the listener heard within the piece and evaluate the possible hearings of M.I.A, a subaltern musical artist.

It is important to note that this essay employs more recent adaptations of the concept of Subaltern, focusing on what Gayatri Pandey terms the “Subaltern Citizen,” an individual within a state granted the status of citizenship and participating within a state as a citizen. However, this type of citizen is constantly barred from the privileges granted the state’s average or ideal citizen due to his/her/their minority status (sexuality, gender, ethnicity, class, nationality, etc). Ultimately the subaltern citizen lacks the social, economic, and political mobility and privileges of the “average” citizen. The artist M.I.A is a citizen of the United Kingdom, a citizenship that places her in a position of relative privilege. However, her life experiences along with her ethnicity, ideologies, religious beliefs, and her gender are by all counts “other” than what would be considered by popular opinion to be mainstream English and “Western” identity, society,

ideology, and culture. Therefore, her music embodies and expresses (un)desire of belonging, more fluid understandings of identity, social power hierarchies, and other ideologies that inherently disrupt normative Western musical discourse and practice.

It is undeniable that subaltern citizens (in one capacity or another) are contributing to the Euro-American/ global music industry, many with subjective and very personal experiences conveyed through music. However, it is important to remember that the privilege of subjective expression through one's own lyrics and/ or music is not necessarily granted/ afforded to every artist. Furthermore, authentic subjective expression often faces negative public reception and even controversy which may hinder a song's popular and economic success. Secondly, "success" within the Euro-American soundscape is widely determined by what popular culture favors in the current cultural moment, meaning lyrics (to an extent) and especially music must fit recognizable/ familiar aural tropes (beats per minute, time signatures, key signatures, chordal progressions, performance style, etc). Inevitably, this means that the rapidly globalizing Euro-American soundscape has rather distinct aural parameters that hinder the Euro-American ear from hearing a piece of subaltern music the same as it would a piece written and performed by an English speaking American artist trained in western music theory. To the Western ear, anything from foreign languages, polyrhythms, and certain vocal techniques could sound "wrong" when in actuality these techniques are "correct" and familiar to the performer and the cultural soundscape from which they originate.

This is the reason that Rebecca Romanow argues that the subaltern musical artist must maintain musical hybridity in order to achieve any success in the global music industry. She continues to argue that musical hybridity has become a trend that works toward the heterogeneity of the Euro-American/ global soundscape and against pride in and practice of national/ cultural

musics (Romanow 5). Furthermore, the language in which the music is performed is used by the listener for identification as well as to locate the singer subjectively, ideologically and physically. It can easily be (mis)assumed that if the singer performs in English, they are subjects of Euro-American soundscape/ culture. This assumption further erases any possibility of the artist's actual subaltern identity, nationality, locality, culture etc. (Weidman 3). It is also common for a listener to assume whatever and however the artist is performing is an authentic expression of subjectivity no matter what the musical subject matter may be. The artist becomes not merely a performer, but what Weidman labels a "musical subject" who is aurally interpreted as someone who is communicating and expressing in both verbal and aural languages that come naturally when in reality, that may not be the case (Weidman 19).

With these problematic misconceptions and industry pitfalls ever threatening to silence the subaltern voice, how can the subaltern artist aurally avoid being misheard and speak in an aural language that authentically expresses his/her subaltern identity? To consider hybridization in music as a tool of aural hegemony that silences subaltern voices would be to ignore how hybridization can facilitate the expression of subaltern voices, identities, and experiences that are shaped by a *mélange* of cultures, experiences, people, and places. M.I.A's style of music is an example of how musical hybridization is a vehicle for authentic subaltern expression. M.I.A's music maintains aural facets of Indian (more specifically Tamil), European, and American musical culture precisely because M.I.A. identifies as a participating member of these cultures. Thus, the burden of answering how the subaltern is heard falls on the listener who must hear and interpret M.I.A through the meeting and cooperation of multiple musical traditions within a single piece of her music.

To discuss music of any sort is to presuppose a listener. It is the reciprocal relationship between performer (sound created) and listener (sound interpreted) that expression through music becomes possible (Kim 4). Therefore, it seems necessary that in order to understand Subaltern music, one must understand the listener as a significant variable within the equation of authentic subaltern expression. It is also important to remember that listening is without visual referent meaning when deprived of visual, the listeners “perceptual system” searches for and substitutes information (4) creating a moment in which, “The inherent partialness of perceptual experience is momentarily suspended” (Casey in Kim 4). To express the complexity of her subaltern identity, M.I.A’s music must aurally signify her complex positionality as a British Tamil woman of color.

Mathangi Arulpragasam was born in London before moving with her mother and father to their native Sri Lanka and eventually to Tamil Nadu in India following the Sri Lankan civil war. By the age of eleven Arulpragasam had moved with her family back to London where she began schooling. M.I.A released her first studio album *Arular* in 2005 with Interscope records, a subsidiary of Universal Music Group (USA). In 2016, she released her fifth studio album *A.I.M.* which spent only a single week on both the United States’ and United Kingdom’s albums chart despite the top- fifty success of each of her past four albums (Inoue). While M.I.A’s music is most often labeled as Hip-Hop in genre, her musical influences include dance/ electronica, rap, reggae, and Tamil film music. Many of her songs are embellished with sampling (tracks extracted from other songs), alternative percussion like swords clashing (“Swords” by M.I.A.), unaffected, intoned or semi-spoken lyrics (words performed with relative musical pitches rather than spoken), rap- style delivery, and eastern instrumentation. The song chosen for this essay’s phenomenological listening interview was “P.O.W.A” from the album *A.I.M.* While the

classification M.I.A's music as "Hip- Hop" and often "rap" by the industry and most listeners diminishes the stylistic complexity of her music, positioning this music as hip-hop attests to its capacity as social and political commentary. ideologically the genre of hip hop provides, as it has since its earliest conceptions, a platform upon which subalterns can express themselves musically.

In her monograph *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postcolonial Europe*, Fatimah El-Tayeb writes that the discovery of Hip-Hop in Europe lead to, "a 'common language' across communities and borders [which] often amounted to an epiphany for young artists who began to use hip-hop as a tool to analyze and name their positionality as minoritarian Europeans within a continental system that continued to define them as foreigners (El-Tayeb xli). Hip Hop in Europe as well as America was capable of intervening on skewed ideological discourse regarding race, migration, and belonging. Hip-Hop's verbal (lyrics) and musical style disrupted pre-existing Western hegemonic ideologies regarding what music was supposed to sound like (tonically neat, melody-centric, rhythmically steady) and what music was allowed to or expected to express. Hip Hop relied instead upon rhythm- heavy accompaniment, spoken lyrics that confronted significant social issues and the performer's experience of marginalization, as well as emotional delivery which made the anguish and hardship of injustice and subaltern citizenship more visceral for the listening public.

It is in part the hearing and interpretation of subaltern musical language that fulfills the music's social goal of sounding marginalized voices within a mass/ popular realm. The following phenomenological interview exposes and explains the pitfalls and the boons of hearing the subaltern in the hybridized music of the Euro-American soundscape.

For this essay's phenomenological interview I selected the song "P.O.W.A" from M.I.A's album A.I.M. released in 2016. I selected the song for its complex mixing of "Eastern" and "Western" musical signifiers, popular culture references, lyric subject matter, and instrumental facets. I was also interested to see how the listener would respond to M.I.A's performance which takes on the semi-spoken and somewhat unaffected line delivery characteristic of her work. The listener, who shall remain anonymous, was a thirty year old white male graduate student at Bowling Green State University who had no prior exposure to M.I.A and little knowledge of any musical traditions originating from India or southern Asia generally. Both the song's title and artist's name were kept from the listener prior to his listening in order to prevent any possible pre-conceptions regarding title or artist which could negatively affect perception of the piece's ideological stance or locality. Prior to listening to the song, I explained to the listener that the following exercise was a "Phenomenological Listening Interview" which meant that his answers could be neither right nor wrong. Rather, the exercise was designed to glean the listener's own subjective experience and interpretation of the songs aural (musical) and verbal (lyric) messages.

I told the listener that I would play the piece three times and that while he listened, he was encouraged to write down "anything that comes to mind." I explained that these things could be formal aspects of the piece like tempo, dynamics, lyrics, instrumentals, or tracks or he could write down more interpretive things like emotions he felt, emotions he felt that the performer was conveying, mental images the song recalled for him, interpretations of lyrics, or literally "anything." Following the listening portion, I would ask questions regarding the experience. The interview following the listening would be (and was) recorded.

The listener's notes were marked by listening (1st, 2nd, 3rd) in order to track which ideas came to the listener each time. Under "1st Listening" the listener noted:

Drums and Bass Line
Blue Moon ba ba
"I'm the Dalai Lama"
British Accent
Power?
Eroticism Do it now
"Middle fingers in air"
Call to action/ protest
listing singers
armor?

The "2nd Listening" noted read:

Long intro 30 secs?
Indian rhythm
Osama
My time
Taking tower
Can't understand part of 2nd verse
Statements of self definition

For the third listening I asked if the listener would like a copy of the song's lyrics. I had withheld the lyrics to this point in order to allow the listener to interpret/ misinterpret the song's words thus facilitating any interpretive phenomena. Hence, section one's notes read "I'm the Dalai lama" while section three's read "Not!" because the listener has learned the actual lyric is "I'm not Dalai Lama" from the typed lyrics. On the provided sheet of lyrics, I blacked out the proper noun M.I.A. occurring when M.I.A. references herself in the seventh section of the piece ("M.I.A. make it spray like it's raining up in here.") again, because I wanted the listener to interpret this reference for himself. The "3rd Listening" notes read:

Fade might help abrupt
Kid chameleon
Not!
No drama
Screw the rest of the world
MIA
Girl Power

There are several things to consider about the listener's notes. Firstly, most of the listener's notes regard lyric aspects of the piece like "Power?" and "Osama" or interpretations of lyrics like "Call to action/ protest." This predominant focus on lyrics supports Weidman's idea that performing music in a common language facilitates identification from the listener and naturally, the listener's notes regard messages the singer explicitly performs. Of all the notes, only five regard musical facets of the piece. What is most fascinating about these music oriented notes is how clearly the listener has understood MIA's complex sense of locality and musical tradition, significant aspects of her subaltern identity. Under "2nd Listening" the listener wrote "Indian rhythm." It is unclear how precisely the listener assessed the "Indianness" of the rhythm but the aural signification of a zils- heavy percussion line (Zils are cymbals mounted on percussion instruments) or the spoken rhythmic repeated "Hey hey hey" of a male chorus incorporated into "P.O.W.A" as a percussive track as well. The listener has also noted "Blue Moon ba ba" in the first listening notes, a note he explained later in the interview.

My goal for the interview itself and eventually my own interpretation of the listener's experience was to pin point and examine significant listening phenomena within the listener's testimony. I was looking for phenomena that indicated meaning or messages the listener had directly or indirectly understood from the piece These are aural messages of which the listener is consciously aware. It was also important to me to determine if these phenomena were instances of successful or unsuccessful hearings of the subaltern musical voice. It must be stated that the unconscious aspects or affective aspects of this interview no doubt impacted the listener's experience. While I cannot begin to guess what bodily affects the listener experienced, it cannot be denied that the listener was affected by a few notable assumptions. Arguably, any time recorded music is presented to a listener, conditions of the music and its origin are (usually

unconsciously) assumed. The very fact that music is recorded means it is limitlessly reproducible and in this, the information age of the internet, it also means that thousands if not millions of other listeners have experienced the same song. This means that in the mind of the listener (and most likely in reality) this recorded and reproducible song is connected to a social formation (Sterne 223). While the listener listens alone, he does so knowing that this listening is still a type of social function in which he is currently participating. Accompanying this (perhaps unconscious) assumption of the social significations of the song is an economic/ commercial one. If a song is worthy of recording and social following, a certain commercial viability is implied. This song is marketable and “popular” because people like it and it is therefore capable of making money. Therefore, the implied popularity of this song affords it a degree of cultural respectability. These basic yet perhaps unconsciously made assumptions color the listeners experience and must be considered alongside the listeners answers.

When asked for initial reactions to the piece, the listener was quick to say, “I do not listen to much rap or hip- hop.” Immediately and as expected, the listener stylistically classified “P.O.W.A.” as a Hip-Hop and/ or rap song. Next, the listener pointed out that he liked, “especially the bass line and the repeated ba ba ba ba da da dang di di dang” track featured as percussion throughout the song. He went on to say that he believed that this particular track was from the song “Blue Moon,” a popular do-wop song in 1950s America. The listener stated that this do wop sample provided him with an initial mental image. While many listeners, including myself, would not catch that this is an allusion to 1950s do wop/ popular culture, for the listener this sampling of “Blue Moon” mentally positioned “P.O.W.A” within at least some kind of aural relation to the American soundscape. The listener went on to expound upon what he noted in his “Second Listening” notes as an “Indian Rhythm” stating, “having seen a couple Bolly Wood

films, I thought the rhythm kind of sounded similar to that.” From the beginning, the listener has recognized from M.I.A.’s particular *mélange* of aural traditions that this music aurally embodies Euro-American and Indian musical cultures much like M.I.A. herself does.

The mixtures true ideological impact however comes from the coexistence of these references within a single song, a fact that ultimately prevents the song from being solely “Western” and “familiar” or solely “Indian” and “other” in sound, but rather a unique and concrete mixture of differing aural traditions and therefore, a musical expression of a complex multi- ethnic, multi-national, multi- cultural subaltern identity.

It is significant to me now re-listening to the interview how cautious and reluctant many of the listener’s answers regarding place, style or culture were despite his being told that there are no right or wrong answers. When asked what mental images came to mind while listening, the listener explicitly stated and repeated that the performer he imagined was, “a faceless female singer.” The listener’s repeated assertion of the performer’s facelessness in his imagination seems no doubt owed to the discomfort the listener felt at labeling the performer with an ethnic, and therefore subaltern identity even though he had (unknowingly) correctly guessed some of the songs Indian influences and most likely the singer’s ethnicity. Later in the interview, the listener implied his conception of the performer’s ethnicity when he stated that she, “has a British sounding accent although I could easily see that as being a kind of Raj, a British Raj type accent.” Later, when asked what the song’s call to action actually was, the listener stated that the performer, “doesn’t want to be associated, necessarily, with her race it seems with the whole ‘not Osama, Dalai lama’ thing... she doesn’t think other people should be associated with a hard line either. The call to action was for everybody to think outside the box not only about her but about themselves as well.”

The listener is obviously aware that race and racial discourse are being questioned by the performer. He also understands her to be a woman of color, made evident by his understanding of “I’m not Dalai lama” as a lyric negation that simultaneously confirms and denies problematic color politics that erase M.I.A.’s identity by lumping her ethnicity into the overly generalized “people of color” category. The listener’s particular aversion to explicitly guessing at or labeling the performer’s ethnicity, comes no doubt from a desire to avoid what is usually the socially inflammatory topic of race. Whether this was an unconscious aversion to discussing race or a conscious effort to avoid the discussion in my company, I do not know. Ultimately, however, this aversion to explicitly recognizing a piece of music as a piece by a subaltern about subaltern experience and subjectivity diminishes the extent to which music by subalterns can communicate and therefore be interpreted as authentic expressions of the subaltern conscious by Euro-American ears. However, while it is not as explicit in “P.O.W.A,” M.I.A. often identifies her Indian heritage, appearance, and beliefs in her music making her subaltern subject-hood undeniable to her listeners. M.I.A.’s lyrics for “P.O.W.A” are negation-heavy. She sings she is not Osama, Obama, Dalai Lama, Madonna, Rihanna, or Ariana. In doing this she simultaneously points out the diversity of the subaltern experience by placing herself apart from “subalterns” of political, social, and spiritual power as well as refuses being likened to other women subaltern performers within the Euro-American soundscape. Her experience and her musical performance of that experience is complex and unlike any other one person.

In light of these two most prominent listening phenomena, it is clear that while the complexity of the subaltern citizen artist is heard in music and can in fact be understood by the western ear as a complex experience and an authoritative voice, the biggest threat to its successful support of subaltern voices is both a musical language that stigmatizes or even fails to

acknowledge the expressive potential of aural messiness such as the combination of cultural sound signifiers like doo-wop and Bollywood percussion, semi-spoken lyrics, and alternative scales. The hegemonic and silencing tendencies of Western/ Euro-American music cannot be denied and still pose a threat to unique musical traditions. Further more common social discourse that limits the explicit discussion of race, power dynamics, gender politics, and sexuality as it is presented in all expressions of culture further hinders the successful hearing of subaltern musical voices.

Ultimately, hybridized subaltern music produced by subaltern citizen artists like M.I.A. carves out an ever increasing space for subaltern aural traditions to be heard with increasing transparency. This music resists the absolute westernization of national/ cultural musics by persistently sounding them in concert with other more familiar musical traditions for all ears to hear, creating a new language for subaltern musical expression. While hybridized subaltern music represents the evolutionary capacity of music to absorb varying musical traditions and sound them in fresh ways, I hope that purer national/ cultural traditions are represented through this absorption and that the Euro-American ear is slowly trained to hear diverse musics and count these musics and the voices that produce them as significant, expressive, and worthy of reverence. Subaltern music within the global Euro-American soundscape is neither right nor wrong, recognizable or “other” but the aural embodiment of intersecting identities, cultures, ideologies, and musics.

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