KANNON/CANON

In addition to her many arms that reach out to the needy and many heads that take in their cries, the goddess of mercy has many names. Kannon is sometimes Kan'on, Kanzeon, or Kwannon, Japanese pronunciations of Kuan-yin, Quan-uin or Guanyin, short for Kuan-shih-yin or Guanshiyin, Chinese translations of the Sanskrit Avalokitasvara, which appears in different texts as Avalokita or Avalokite\[\] vara depending on the historical period.\[\] Circulating as nominative excess, Kannon subverts the representational logic of the singular name. She arrives at an Anglo-ear with an already-echoic effect. There is a transliterative displacement that troubles her invocation, one that can be heard as the phonic trace of a certain type of expansiveness in her formation, a capacity to become different from herself over time. To play Kannon as music is to engage this displacement, to sonify a physical movement: a differentiating frequency that becomes audible as a reverberating duration. Music is not a metaphor for, but a metonym of this movement. It does not symbolically represent or signify her as a figure, but directly sounds the long echo and dispersed intensities through which Kannon coheres.

Kannon persists in the movement between a phonic and sonic circulation; yet at the same time, she characterizes a unique capacity to hear. In Chinese, Guanshiyin or Kuan-shih-yin translates roughly to "perceiving the sounds/cries of the world." This suggests that her power is premised on a capacity to introject—that she is merciful to the extent that she is permeable. Mercy in this account depends on the flexing of an open aperture, the ample depths of a cavity or hole. This capacity to take things is marked here and elsewhere as feminine. In various cultural discourses, the female body is formulated as both excess and emptiness, structured by the supposed mystery of reproduction: how a body yields other bodies, how the hollow space of the womb bears forth. The female form—or more specifically, the culturally bound concepts of femininity that arise from and attach to it—becomes a stage for this philosophical question of how out of nothing can come something. Through this biological misprision, the feminine becomes a measure. It becomes the primary nothing that animates something: the negative space against which the positive forms of masculinist agency can take shape. The feminine becomes a background noise against which the meaningful force of phallogocentric speech—the king's decree, the father's prohibition, the policeman's hail—can be heard.

Kannon's hollows are configured as an openness to the world, as empty space that is not simply empty, but resonant with the sounds of the suffering. An oft-quoted phrase from the Heart S\(\tilde{T}tra\), a text attributed entirely to Kannon, reads, "form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is emptiness, that is form." While this statement has implications for Buddhist philosophy and practice beyond what I am able to account for here (implications that my attempt to "account for" in this context would only fetishize), it nonetheless resonates with a proposition advanced here in musical form. Insofar as Kannon names a sonic or echoic structure, the phrase presents a provocation for listening. To say that form is emptiness and emptiness is form troubles their deeply entrenched and gendered opposition: the idea that the femaleness is a lack of form. Rather, form as a monolith is an empty signifier, and emptiness has its own material dimensions—dimensions are not necessarily seen, but sounded. We might therefore recognize in Kannon a radical notion that structures both a certain type of feminism and certain type of music.

What is metal about mercy? Metal is not usually associated with the feminine, or with feminism.

On the contrary, music critics usually write about the genre as concerned primarily with performances of masculinity and powered by a phallic thrust.³ Some metal is indeed vested in this maintenance of the masculine; of course, some metal is also misogynistic, nationalistic, vitriolic, or homophobic; some metal can only thrust. Yet if we think more broadly about metal, we might recognize it as moved by the sound and feeling of intensity, which, although often at play in masculine performance, cannot be reduced to that project. As a sensation, intensity is not merely penetrative but is also immersive; as a feeling, it does not simply enter the body but also surrounds it. To neglect the full spectrum of intensity is to delimit what is heavy about metal to what is knowable about heaviness, evading a confrontation with that which is heaviest of all: enormity—the enormity of an emptiness that encompasses both the formed and unformed, an emptiness that is full insofar as it is active.

Not everyone needs to encounter this enormity. The material inheritances, civic freedoms, social and economic entitlements, and unmarked quotidian movement generally known as privilege fortify some against this fecund vacuity, creating an armory of stolen resources in which a normative subjectivity can take shelter and take root. Yet for those bodies historically stolen from and then produced as empty—the black, brown, feminine, and effeminate bodies stripped of subjecthood, denied the sustenance of citizenship, rendered mere labor, mere matter, mere flesh, such encounter is intertwined with a certain method of survival. Some more than others recognize the abundance in what has been voided, the song of empty space. Some more than others live off and depend on the plentitude of our abnegated condition. Though we might at times come together under the banner of a specific politics, a specific identity, we who share these stakes cannot fully anticipate whom each other are. Our commonality is not structured on a fixed and stable position, such as a shared place in a binary gender opposition: rather, what we have in common is an investment in troubling the structures of power that maintain such binarisms in the first place. Kannon, in her plurality of names, occurs as both a man and a woman; yet whether man or woman, Kannon is always capacious. Kannon, the figure, is formally and sonically constituted by a capacity to take things in. *Kannon*, the record, presents a sounding of that capacity in three parts.

Kannon 1 begins with a soft entry—as sound that as it is sustained, swells. It cycles through ascending tones, which broaden as they deepen, creating the feeling that something is being summoned. This summons seems to reach to both the depths of an internal abysm as well as the heights of external beyond. Attila Csihar's voice is at first almost indiscernible from the guitars, audible alternately as a low growl and high hiss, which by the end of the track become simultaneous. In his low guttural fry, we can hear the silent spaces between the glottal sounds; in the higher fricatives, we can hear the throat's hollow a passage, its opening. The enunciation of the lyrics takes precedence over their figurative content. Csihar's metonymically mouths rather than speaks each word's meaning, manipulating the phonic excess in the phoneme. As both a low growl and a high hiss, the voice is a negotiation of air and empty space. The voice activates something in the guitar drones, which at different times foreground, subsume, or overtake it. The drones cut through the enclosures of the musical measure in the creation of a continuous sound; yet at the same time, their continuity is a manipulation of unheard emptiness, of voided space. As a sonic frequency, a periodic repetition in time, drones are comprised of not only an aggregation of notes but also the inaudible gaps between. Here, drone becomes a technique that invokes Kannon through her own operation: through acts of introjection, of opening up, taking in. What we have in the property of the property

out a sonic extension of having mercy, of perceiving the

If Kannon 1 invokes, Kannon 2 intones. The ow rumbling sound that opens this second track gives way to a dexterous movement between higher notes. The drones are not only held but actively played; the voice, when it enters, chants. Together, they create a shift in tone, an overall melodic effect. The chant as a vocal technique allows Csihar to render his singular voice plural, to conjure a sense of plentitude or collectivity that fractures and multiplies at the mouth. In his chant, the lyrics are more discernible as words, and in this legibility we can read a structure or pattern. Over the course of the song, we hear five verses describing the life and works of Kannon sung and then sung again in reverse order: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. This reversal and repetition creates a type of chiasmus at the center of the composition—a type of crossing, a reversal of a structure that produces an inverted parallelism. Chiastic structures are often counctuated, as this one is, by a caesura: a type of active empty space, a pregnant pause, in which the meaning cas a caesura in classical musical composition might), but can be heard as an active interplay between sounds and words, mirroring a caesura's poetic function in anguage. The chiasmus turns, the crossing happens, in the empty expanse between the repetition of the sempty space is not empty, but sonorous. It musically be sounds the type of transformation the lines describes: the melodic smoothing of two terms diametrically sposed. Like the transformation of hell into paradise, the chiasmus turns one form of intensity into another. It does so through the formal intervention of the caesura, which allows for the activation of nothing as something, or more concretely, the capture of empty air as sound.

Csihar's chanting, insofar as it is reminiscent of monks or organized religious practice more generally, also bringing to mind Kannon's false cognate, "canon." Canon, from the Latin can nand the Ancient Greek of body of accepted scriptures, ecclesiastic or juridical laws. It also refers, by no coincidence, to that body of literary, philosophical, or artistic works deemed the most important, culturally valuable, worthy of study—works that become the measure or standard of judgment. As critical theorists have long argued, the canon is a highly Eurocentric and patriarchal compendium of knowledge that obscures its historical conditions of power, specifically the relationship of cultural production to institutional authorities such as the Church or State, not to mention the maintenance of those institutions through armed conflict and colonial conquest.⁴ To mishear Kannon as canon is to be reminded of how mercy exists in relation to its opposite—punishment—and how quickly the measuring rod can become a disciplinary stick. There is truth in the homophones, insofar as these similar sounding words bring into stark contrast different somatic systems of knowing, the ocular and the haptic. The ocular is that which can be seen and known; the haptic is that which can be felt or heard. In Western philosophical discourses, the latter is the root of masculine Enlightened thought which produces knowledge and value, while the former is delegated to the realm of feminine intuition, which does not. Barred from the production of value, the feminine is overdetermined as an originary measure of nothing. To sing Kannon and not canon as Csihar does, is to vocalize a haptic mode of knowing. To make metal from Kannon and not canon as SunnO))) does, is to insist that intensity overwhelms our familiar names for it, those phallic characterizations we already value and know.

By Kannon 3, the openness of mercy take another shape. First, from a small, high-pitched tonextends a deepening then wavering sound. Ther repeated over the duration of the track is a descending pattern of chords, which create the feeling of something being released, let go. Although the ide of mercy might encourage us to read such descent it moral context, the effect more accurately resemble

a grammatical declension. In grammar, a declension is a grouping premised on commonality, a multiplication of a form—in this case, audible as a playing or laying out of the multiple tones that are variations or reverberations of mercy as sound. This turn to grammar does not suggest a subordination of the sonic to the linguistic, but rather a commonality between the two the coterminality between phonic meaning and sonic excess. Mercy becomes, in this third track, not only the reception and transmission of audible intensities but also their multiplication, which as the tonality of the track suggests, can feel heavy. Interwoven with that sonic declension of mercy is Csihar's alternately growled and hissed refrain, "she destroys mortality"—which is both less and more metal than it sounds. Or one hand to destroy mortality means to eradicate the enormity of what is human, mortal-ness itself. On the other, it means the perpetuation of that enormity, for the eradication death—mortality—is necessarily the perpetuation of life. Kannon is thus engaged with the most brutal of projects: that of sustenance or survival The goddess of mercy sustains others in herself. She has mercy insofar as she perceives their suffering hears their cries, takes it all in. The album plays her introjecting action as sound, taking up the durational structure that already characterizes her work. Here work is a reproductive labor, one modeled on a maternal function of destroying mortality and perpetuation life.

Kannon, as a figure, asks a question tha haunts social relations, particularly as they are violently shaped by disciplinary force: How are we reproduced by mercy? Kannon, as an album, refocuses this question as a formal one: How is mercy reproduced? This question of reproduction is complicated by the fact that Kannon's medium is largely invisible. The cries of the suffering which hail her, are not seen but heard. Her work—the act of taking in their cries, of sustaining and maintaining life through an introjective action—relies on the unseer and unvalued feminine labor of reproduction. It seems that Kannon eludes us when we try to apprehend he solely through the dominant frameworks of vision or language. Within the frameworks of legibility and visibility, she appears either as nothing, that originary feminine ground against which masculine agency is figured, or as something other than herself, mutated by the confines of this dominant nexus of knowledge and power. Within an ocular paradigm, the seduction of the homophone sometimes proves too much, and Kannor too quickly becomes canon, which is to say, the life sustaining reproductive work of mercy too soon gives way to the value-producing disciplinary function of the standard. How then can mercy be reproduced—felt, if not seen? In what ways can we sense its formationer that seen and action? How can we make sensible rather than legible, those unseen operations that sustain us? With this record, SunnO))) works through these questional response. They propose that Kannor can persist, stow away, in the negotiations of form and comprehences that constitutes accurate.

- Aliza Shvartz, New York Sentember 2015

¹ For more information about the nomenclature and etymolog of Kannon, see Chun-fang Yu, Kuan-yin, The Chinese Transformation √Avalokite⊡vara (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) or Lokes Chandra, "The Origin of Avalokite⊡vara,» Indologica Taurinenaia: Ti Journal of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies, XIII (1981) 1985, 199

² See Edward Conze, Buddhist Wisdom: Containing Tl Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra, (New York: Randomhouse, 2001) 76

For a thoughtful consideration of metal's negotiations of mesculinity, see Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone, Queerness in Heavy Metal Music: Metal Bent (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Robert Walser, Running With The Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

⁴ For more on the formation of the Western canon and its relationship to colonial conquest, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

An example from commodity culture: The camera company Canon was originally named Kwanon, reflecting an alternate Japanese pronunciation of Kannon. Their 1934 logo consisted of an image a many-armed Kwanon emerging from flames. We might assume that the company wanted to position their new camera as resembling the goddess of mercy: as an aperture through which to take in the world. However, in 1935, when the company began global marketing, they changed their name from Kwanon to Canon. As their website explains: "The name Canon carries such meanings as 'holy scripture' and 'criterion or standard of judgment.' It effectively captures Canon's corporate spirit, which aims to set a global standard for advanced technologies and service while becoming a criterion in the industry to which others will aspire." The camera quickly becomes an organ for sensing the world to a technological apparatus for capturing and standardizing it. The visual paradigm of photography proved too close, too easily available to the ocular forms of knowledge-production with which discipline and punishment are entwined. In this sense, the Canon camera concretizes a slippage too easily made between Kannon and canon—the ease through which the capacious hole can be overwritten by the disciplinary stick. For more on the institutional history of Canon, see www.canon.com/corporate/logo.html