

Eric: Okay, so, I'm going to talk about four songs. Ah, I put five, ah, on your handout, ah, but it's pretty clear to me that we can't get all five. So, I'll talk about two relatively quickly.

Audience: (inaudible)

Eric: We have more handouts. Thank you for making more copies (chatter, laughter).

Eric: So I'll talk about two very quickly.

Ah, one is a song about railroad workers, ah and one is about Cuban plantation workers.

And then afterword, I'll focus on two songs about Vincent Chin partially because it's

June 30th, which is shortly after the anniversary of his death. So, we'll focus on that. So the first song is by Dawen. Um, he's from Chicago, um, a Northwestern graduate; I know there's at least one in this room (laughs).

Um, he sings in an R&B and a soul style. He does two very different things, ah, in his life, and is really listened to by two different groups and used in different ways. One is that he does really politically-conscious, original songs. And the the is that he does Mandarin covers of Top 40 songs. So, politically-conscious songs really used for Asian American studies type, classes, right? Mandarin covers used for language schools (laughter). So, a lot of children know these Mandarin covers from Chinese school. Um, the song that I will talk about today is Ku Li, obviously a transliteration of "Coolie". And it's from the 2009 album "American Me" and it's

used to do these things, these main things: pay tribute, to raise awareness, and to open difficult conversations. And one interesting thing is that he chose to set the lyrics from the point of view of a railroad worker. How many of you know this song? Just to... nobody. Okay. Cool. Okay. So let's look at the lyrics of the song opening. The song basically has this very similar lyrics at the beginning and the end, and then different lyrics in the middle. So the beginning, "Here I sweat, blastin' through the rock in the Promised Land, when I came they said that I would find a better..." better what? We don't know. Right? This, he ends there. "Better..." blank. "Though I toil, dollar a day in the Promised Land, there will come a time when I will find a

better..." (gestures) "I've been working on the railroad, all the live long day, I've been working on the railroad, just tryin' to make my way, I've been working on the railroad, living in this hell, I've been working on the railroad, just to hear the tall man tell me I'm a..." and then some other voice comes in to say that word. Okay, so what is the missing word after "better"? We don't know, right? We can think about that as you listen to it. Right? And what does it mean that he's unable to say that word? We can talk about that after we listen to it. (music plays).

So there's that percussion that sounds like construction. (Dawen sings "Chink, chink")

Is he just making a construction sound? At this point, we're not quite sure yet. I sort of gave it away. It's not obvious if you listen to the song the first time. (music continues with piano and singing).

(music stops).

So that's same thing comes back in, and now you know what that word actually is.

Audience: Eric?

Eric: Yeah?

Audience: Is this song in Chinese at all, and if so, you know, (inaudible) dialect?

Eric: I don't think he speaks (inaudible) dialect. Um, I think he only speaks Mandarin.

Audience: But the railroad workers would have been speaking (inaudible).

Eric: Right. Yeah (laughter). He's not trying to be authentic here (laughter). Yeah. I have not heard this song in Chinese, any type of Chinese. It's possible that he has done one, but I have not heard it. It has not be released, anyway. If he's done one live, I wouldn't know.

Audience: Well we don't even know if it's legitimate, do we?

Eric: Oh he's not trying, I mean, these are his words, right? Yeah.

Audience: It's not a...

Eric: It's not a translation of a real...

Audience: Of somebody that...

Eric: It's, it's his words. Yeah, he wrote the words. Okay. So, the bridge section, with the different lyrics, um, "No matter how much I labor at the track, no matter how many miles I can lay, the sun'll always be burning on my back, and I will never see a cooler day." This could, of course, be somewhat ironic

given what we know about conditions of building the railroad in the winter. Ah, "All you gotta do is take a look, all you gotta do is be aware, for if you open up the history book, you'll find that I am barely even there." (murmurs).

"Here I am, not the right race in the Promised Land, guess I should've thought that one day it would matter, Uncle Sam, says I've not place in the Promised Land, still I really didn't think that it would matter, cause I've been working on the railroad..." Right? So, these are words where he seems to still have some sort of hope, some sort of dream, right? He thinks that the American dream could be possible, and I think this is also where the music sort of opens up that optimistic feel for these two verses at the bottom here.

(music continues with piano and singing)

(music stops)

Eric: Okay, so you can hear that in the last two verses here, the music really goes to the higher register, we get high sounds, right? Very smooth sounds as opposed to the earlier part of the song. Um, but whether this is sustainable or not we will see at the end, right? Any thoughts? Yeah, please.

Audience: So I don't understand when he says "And I will never see a cooler day." I mean if those were the winters (inaudible), it was cold (laughs)!

So,

Eric: Right.

Audience: This is not to be taken literally, is it an (inaudible) cool?

Eric: Yeah.

Audience: As in, not a positive day.

Eric: Right. No, I, I mean that he's just sweaty even if it was really cold because the work is really hard. Right? I, I, I haven't thought of it in that sort of, in the sense that you're suggesting, but that is certainly possible. Yeah?

Audience: Hi. I'm wondering if it's not a sort of, um, I'm trying to think of the right word.

But, like, a "oh, the sun's always burning my back," so that's sort of, like, the focus? Like, the attention that they get, from people who aren't them? And that the heat is always kind of on them in a specific way? Maybe it's more figurative than literal.

Eric: No, I think that's probably what he's thinking. Other thoughts? Okay.

So, let's see how this song ends.

"Here I bleed, blastin' through the rock in the Promised Land, after all this time I haven't found a better..." we don't know yet, right? "Though I'll die, dollar a die in the Promised Land, I still hope that those who follow find a better..." Right? So he's given it up for himself. He says, maybe later generations will find a better...again, we don't know what that... thing is. And then it ends with, "A better, a better..." many times. Let's listen to it.

(music begins)

Eric: Thoughts? Yeah?

Audience: I think the "better" he's talking about is a better life. Um, because, I went to the same, you know, conference that, ah, (inaudible) 150th anniversary of the completion of the railroad and many of those people came from what, ah, Dan here said was (inaudible) and these were farmers. Uh, and the work that they came here was (inaudible). They didn't really have the skills but they had determination. And they came here because of poverty and the economics in China and famine and all that. That's what drove them to come here, and they came here, they had no idea it was going to be this type of work, it was very dangerous type of work, and the hope was to make enough money, uh, to go back to China, uh, and have a good life. So, I think that's the life he's talking about. And I see, even when it says something like (inaudible). Every day, was like in the 90s or up to 100, and they had to blast through mountains, very dangerous, using dynamite...

Eric: Right.

Audience: And a lot of them died. I think it was like 12,000 or 15,000 Chinese built that railroad, um, ah, the bridge to the east and the west, so it was a really, really tough life, ah, and they're really hoping that those that stayed and had families, they will continue. And they do! To this day, I mean, I just got an email today that there's some descendants of these railroad workers...they were involved, in, in the Apollo 11 project (inaudible). So I think that's the (inaudible) better life.

Eric: Uh-huh. Yeah, so why don't you think he says "life"?

Audience: Cause he didn't get it. This guy, he's hoping that his children and those that continue on get it. I mean, that's my interpretation.

Eric: Right. That's great. Yeah, thank you.

Other thoughts?

Do you think it's optimistic at the end?

That it might happen?

Audience: Well, it did happen (inaudible).

Audience: I'm just sort of curious. What's the background of Ku Li/Coolie? I don't know him. Cause he had descended...

Eric: No, that's the name of the song.

Audience: Oh, I thought that was the author.

Eric: Dawen is the...yeah.

Audience: What's Dawen's background?

Eric: He's from Chicago. Um, he, he's, I think he's second generation. Ah, he grew up mostly in Chicago, he lived in Hong Kong for about four years. And then he went to college at Northwestern. Um, he was a, I think psychology and vocal performance major, I think. Yeah?

Audience: Yeah, I find the contrast rather interesting.

He's living this miserable life, but he has hope.

And that's universal for all immigrants, right?

There's sacrifices that they have to make, and here, you aren't getting what is better yet, but they are hoping for a better life. And that's what's happening here with people who are coming in.

Eric: Uh-huh. Yeah. What do you think of the repetitions on "better"? Is that...what does that mean? To say it, like, six times at the end?

Audience: Well, for me, when I hear the repetition of "better" because of the first person singing the song, doesn't get the "better", as we see here and generations comes along as hopefully each generation gets better. And I sort of see it as, a possible, as a sort of hope, maybe.

In the longer term (inaudible).

Eric: Right. Yeah. So I think that there are definitely different ways of thinking about this, right? A better, you know, could be different generations can get better and better, also sometimes when you're not very sure, right? You repeat it. To try to convince yourself, right? So the fact that he repeats it several times might also be a sign that he's not so sure that this is going to work, right? Ah, so I think that people can think of it in both ways and that maybe he doesn't get to be a better...what? Yeah?

Audience: But that's also a very common theme of hymns. Hymns have a refrain later on, over and over and over again. But I also bring out there's

a part in there about history. Ah, history never recognized until this past May. 150 years, we never recognized the Chinese worker railroad's contribution to building America. And if you look at the pictures of every 50th anniversary, you don't see a Chinese there. This past May, sort of like, we finally got recognized. The contribution and I think this whole thing about "better", it took a long time 150 years. But in the end, look at the accomplishment of Chinese Americans to this country.

Eric: Uh-huh, yeah. Okay? Yes?

Audience: I'm wondering what motivated him to, to write this and sing this song.

Eric: I don't know, I have not heard (inaudible).

Audience: When, when was this written?

Eric: 2009.

Audience: 2009? So it was before this (inaudible).

Eric: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, it was...uh, he, the entirety of this first album is him talking about his identity. So it's called "American Me", because he's sort of putting a stake in the fact that "I am an American".

So, okay! Let's look at the second song.