

Soundtrack of My Life – Scholarship Essay

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My first words were in Spanish. I only speak English. Juxtaposition #1. My childhood home was filled with the sound of classical guitar, piano, and world musicians— of whom, my mom’s favorite, had on CDs she printed over the years. There was the sound of traffic from the nearby busy roads, the intermittent sounds of music, families with young children whose high voices echoed, and dogs barking; the familiar soundtrack of an apartment complex neighborhood.

The foundation of my childhood was characterized by a memorable lack of foundation.

Juxtaposition #2. The context— a removed connection to an ever-changing baseline. The threshold consisted of my small family: me, my mom, and a rotating roster of short-lived pets. An average day was a cacophony, a grab bag of songs and sounds. There were the “That’s What I Call Music” and “Kidz Bop” CDs my mom bought me from the department store, played on my little grey RadioShack radio, with songs like “Pon de Replay” by Rihanna, “Circus” by Britney Spears, “Heartless” by Kanye West, “Music” by Madonna, 80’s pop and electro like “Funkytown” by Lipps Inc., “Genius of Love” by Tom Tom Club, 2000’s indie vocalists like Natasha Bedingfield and Colbie Caillat, Jay-Z, and even Alvin and the Chipmunks remixes on the family laptop. That laptop was cluttered with my mom’s teacher work curriculum, where she’d burn CDs on iTunes. I remember the little melodies made up of meows that I’d play on my cat piano alongside my two cats, and then eventually my first keyboard— used, of course, which I cherished above all other toys.

My essence of life lived in spontaneous sounds. It didn't really live at school—structured and rigid, quiet, sitting still, being a “good little monkey,” of which I was NOT. Juxtaposition #3. School, where my low-performing, poorly-funded school district wouldn't afford a dual-immersion Spanish/English program, despite my school being 60-80% Latino or Hispanic demographics, could have given my first words a formal foundation. The essence surely didn't live in a home in a quiet neighborhood. I was in middle school, where the "barrio" Spanish spoken by my peers felt like a private club—cool, colloquial, coded, but unwelcoming to a little boy who couldn't keep up.

I've spent most of my life existing in-between spaces. A "perpetual foreigner," as I've come to think of it. Hard to contextualize as a kid, moving every 1-2 years into a new apartment complex, for some reason I still don't get. I was mostly focused on my Lego sets, plastic marble courses, and Thomas the Tank Engine wooden train tracks in that wicker basket from IKEA. All of those were modular; they could be broken down and set up an infinite amount of ways, no matter the distance, the move, or the boxes of belongings that seemed to materialize and vanish, swelling and shrinking with every move— constantly in-between...

This shifting feeling has become my life. It's why I'm yearning to reclaim old parts of myself, distant, feeling foreign. I am enchanted by my mom's stories of her travels to Spain, seeing her smile brighter than anything else I knew; stories of where she studied in the 90s in Madrid and Ireland before I was born. Her graduate work at USD, fleeting memories and old photos of her blue graduate gown, visuals of the Spanish architecture and beautiful landscaping, where I was baptized in the “Founders Hall” Catholic Chapel as an infant. It all feels so ancient and distant, that part of me; yet the ripples synchronize and go so deep. Now the torch has been passed to me. Her dreams have become mine, where I'm pushing toward dual citizenship in Spain, where she wanted to take me my whole life but couldn't afford as a busy single mother on an elementary school teacher's salary—forever a dream, a promise, in-between have and have not, real and make-believe.

The looming shadow of unkept promises reminiscent of which my distant father would make over the phone, but never show up to fulfill. A growing fear of missed potential. The waiting. Irregular changes, like trying different diets every 6 months as my mom tried to figure out the missing link between my developmental and behavioral quirks and complicated food allergies, frequently changing the foods I could eat; scarcity—so much change, more than a child could understand. As I think back, there are so many question marks between the years—liminal voids of lost or vague memory. I feel a sense of remorse for the memories that have faded, and amidst this, there was key stability in crucial areas. My schooling—which, thankfully, stayed the same for grades K-8—is where most of my recallable life happened. Education is a big pillar for my family, with my mom directly supporting my education through her love for learning and strengths as a teacher in the subjects she could.

Language, both English and Spanish, has been our family's shared strength for as long as I can remember. My mother's father was a language savant, speaking English, Spanish, German, Dutch, and Russian, among various others. I often wonder about our family heritage— if, perhaps, there is an epigenetic or ancestral link to linguistics that our ancestors used to survive and thrive. Words can carry so much meaning, yet I question if I really resonate with the words themselves, or the space between them; the silence.

My relationship with change is something I am actively discovering, and as I do, I just have even more questions. I am realizing both the skepticism and the curiosity are foundations of why I'm an artist. Perhaps it's why I've never been satisfied with just “getting by,” the status quo, a single story, a single discipline, or feeling stuck in a single place for too long. The stories and emotional catharsis I can materialize from thin air, like jazz, promise an altruistic reality; one of transmutation and emotional alchemy. Music and visual art have become a way to build the bridges and roads and train tracks I used to build out of toys around the house, to now carry me, channeling a simultaneously familiar yet goosebumps-inducing sensation; new and fascinating, and like home, ever changing.

I'm fascinated by the seams: the lifelong learning process, a creative design, where intention both desired and unconscious takes shape in reality. Innovation is tempered by nurture and nature, like Lego structures taking shape within the confines of the yet-to-be-unpacked apartment living room. Like how sound reflects off of bare, un-lived-in, freshly painted dwelling spaces— how it is absorbed, materializes and vanishes— swelling and shrinking along with the moving boxes...

I'm in love with improvisation; experiencing how a hum becomes a song with lyrics accompanied by a musical score, then actualized as visual performance. Much alike if an article of worn clothing can tell a specific human story through the process it undergoes throughout the origin of pieces and parts in a production line, travelling across the world to a retail transaction, and its stages of unique transformation as its use becomes consumed and worn. How an old building weathers inorganically, yet perfectly chaotic, its history a reflection of how the space between the beams was utilized, our very threads undergo constant synthesis at their seams weaving a narrative of resilience.

The grief process, or more accurately, the stages of radical acceptance, has been the core of my personal journey; learning to observe changes and patterns and reflecting on them is all part of the-ground-up work I've been doing for years on my own. When I was emancipated via transfer of guardianship from my mother to my father at 16, I learned how to build a life from scratch in a new town, new state, new school, new family— a 180° rewired context. I had so much on my mind that I wrote and uploaded original non-prose poetry online every day in the library during lunch, since I had no friends, which was a freedom I had never had before. The poems, coupled with my interest in DAW based audio software like GarageBand, transformed into writing songs. There was so much technical and applied learning in just the foundations of teaching myself to sing, to play acoustic guitar, to play piano, to produce digital music, and make it sound remotely listenable so I could share it with the world. I HAD to get it out, which required I teach myself about the music industry and recording process to fund and eventually release my own EP, "Bones are Red," at 17, during the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine, during my senior year before graduating high school.

After several years, a 1000-mile move across the country, moving alone, again– into a new home with my ex-stepdad, then getting evicted, becoming fully self-supporting, working full time, getting fired from several jobs... A chaotic history between 12th grade and my first semester of junior college, at Palomar Community College in San Marcos, CA. I kinda hated it, and failed every class over the course of two semesters– partially due to being forcefully evicted and having to move residences 5 times in a span of 12 months– but through surviving the various experiences, I had gained lots and realized my passion for stability, support, and more knowledge. I knew I wanted to master several disciplines, due to my hunger for any and all information I could get my hands on in my vast areas of interest. I wish to study for the rest of my life, enriching myself with skills that continue to liberate me, for both the vision of harmony I am manifesting and a goal of sharing beautiful art with the world in a meaningful and impactful way.

The language of modern music is inherently intertwined with digital mediums and the internet, which led me to pursue studying Music Technology and Recording Arts. Now, I'm committed to the four-semester audio engineering program at MiraCosta Community College, where I've been enrolled for two years, learning every detail of what I have already been doing for years, but from an academic standpoint. I am simultaneously enrolled in for-credit courses to earn an AA in Liberal Arts for Creative and Applied Arts. This semester, through my work as an unpaid TA Intern in the Kinesiology department on campus, I am uniting practical studies of anatomy and functional movement, mirroring my creative training in dance– my way of studying the body as a medium, partly due to my Major's focus of applied arts and performance, plus a major interest in the body as physical architecture for fashion and performance art.

The more I do this work, the more questions I have, the more skeptical I become of existing systems in my vicinity. And in many ways I feel I'm running into the limits of my own environment, like a fish in a small pond. This is most likely amplified by logistics like not owning a personal vehicle and due to unique and challenging circumstances in my recent past, which formed some cognitive bias and a perception of having to constantly strive towards high-bar goals. This is a double-edged sword.

Something I notice, for example, is that in the local music scene it's been hard– nearly impossible– to find

likeminded peers who are willing to make the music I want to make, or share my interests in specific art philosophy and culture beyond appearances or short-term gratification. This has been tremendously isolating and frustrating.

San Diego County is a large area— I’ve lived here for years; yet there are many regions and local scenes I haven’t explored much due to the aforementioned transportation barriers combined with my sheltered and strict childhood upbringing. I can’t seem to shake the feeling that the life I’m trying to build doesn’t have a blueprint here. North County San Diego is, for me, the cliché tropic hometown that I, a young adult, can’t wait to leave. I have history here, of which I don’t feel fondly, and the monotony of suburbia is safe but boring. The status quo of things not really changing other than new fast food joints popping up in former dirt lots every few months does not inspire joy or innovation. It’s a landscape of asphalt, fast food logos, and marine bases— cultural stagnancy and imperialistic, capitalism-fueled economic expansion; forms of modern and ideological colonialism. The very thing I’m trying to grow beyond.

This is why my academic focus is so singular: study abroad. In all my research, I see Japan as a culture that has mastered the synthesis I’ve been silently striving for my entire life. It goes a bit deeper than a topical interest in the "Pop" Japan of contemporary art and anime, of which I do enjoy. Deeper still— I’m not quite settling for the commodified concept of "Zen" often sold to the West— though I admit since I was very young I’ve found a deep, aesthetic peace in the geometry of a pagoda or the flow of a rock garden, or New Age “Spa” themed ambient music.

My resonance is structural, not aesthetic, and a necessity forged by my own fractures. This juxtaposition is fascinating. It is found in Kintsugi (金継ぎ), or “golden joinery.” This art form does not hide the fracture of a broken pot; it highlights the seam with gold, honoring the break as part of the history rather than a mistake. This philosophy of wabi-sabi—embracing the visual, flawed, and imperfect—is a healing salve for the post-gifted kid burnout syndrome I’ve felt, which almost kept me from pursuing higher education, and the body dysmorphia that, as a teen, compounded my insecurity and rigidity while

experiencing bullying in school. Kintsugi is the physical expression of Mushin (無心, "no mind"), a spiritual state rooted in non-attachment and equanimity amid changing conditions. A glimpse into the possibility for acceptance.

Like improvisational jazz, the artist accepts change not as an interruption but as the medium itself. This compassionate sensitivity, known as *mono no aware* 物の哀れ, is the acceptance of the "vicissitudes of existence over time"—as the ceramicist Christy Bartlett describes. I feel strangely familiar with the idea that Japan is a place where a deep, ancient reverence for nature is not at odds with being the most technologically advanced society on earth; they are integrated by that same flow.

My intention of studying abroad in Japan isn't based on an assumption of ease. What's most confounding about studying abroad, from my experience in Florence last summer, is how the romantic ideas of life in a totally foreign place can be met by a reality where so much can go wrong. From short-term inconveniences like missing the local bus, losing belongings in public, or to the extent of unexpected disagreements with peers, and being terrified of exploring alone but doing so anyway—are lessons that rustle the fabric of old fears.

Within uncertainty is kinetic potential for unexpected growth. In the moment of appraisal, I may actively reframe the emotional judgment through a meta-lens of resilience and acceptance; a kind of backwards, in-hindsight dopamine-hacking exercise to rewire the rejection-sensitive vestigial brain. It goes against the hard-wired code of the sympathetic nervous system to willingly expose myself to difficult situations, yet the guise of the "romantic vacation getaway abroad" can be a premise that I know will offer the chance for new experiences. I only need to be kind and compassionate, no matter how it goes. The key elements here, which I believe are a measure of character and perspective, are both gratitude and grit.

I know Japan isn't a tourist theme park. I don't intend to contribute to the hordes of Western tourists who leave a sore impression. I will truly do my best to be a kind and gracious guest in Japan, like I would visiting the home of a friend, gracefully, aware and with appreciation for the language and customs. I

admire how Japanese society has masterfully sutured its wounded history and fractals of past history with a multifaceted, self-realized, kaleidoscopic future.

Inspired, I learn to skillfully weave the frayed threads of my past into my present. I am painting a skillful and self-informed future, one of harmony and nature. I have the portfolio. I have the academic prowess. I have a powerful testimony of resilience and the drive to put that resilience into action.

And then, the renewing sense of compassion, which I am embracing; one that lets me take a break from the self-imposed pressure of “doing” for the sake of the cultural “maximized productivity” mirrored across both the US and Japan, into more “being,” and knowing when to rest as well. I need not perpetually be some wised oracle who makes all-knowing, calculated decisions leagues beyond the ability of my current self, at 22 years old.

I admire East Asian writing on aesthetics, generally consistent in saying that the goal of ink and wash painting is not simply to reproduce the appearance of the subject, but to capture its spirit. To paint a horse, the ink-wash painting artist must understand its temperament better than its muscles and bones. To paint a flower there is no need to perfectly match its petals and colors, but it is essential to convey its liveliness and fragrance.

"Although the wheel has thirty spokes its utility lies in the emptiness of the hub. The jar is made by kneading clay, but its usefulness consists in its capacity. A room is built with walls, windows and doors, but the space within the walls measures the room's value. In the same way matter is necessary to form, but the value of reality lies in its immateriality. Or thus: a material body is necessary to existence, but the value of a life is measured by its immaterial soul." (Lao Tzu 11)

I acknowledge my radical growth as I move closer to my manifestations of the future. I am learning to skillfully overcome financial limitations, having built mobility through skills gained in scholarship writing, independent of luck or external support. It's funny how a knack with words has liberated me.

Abroad, I seek to interlace beyond a tourist or consumer— a mere thread, as a student of life, in a place that has perfected the art of the seam. For a student who has spent a lifetime “navigating the gaps” to finally go and study a culture that has made an art of them, as both a serious milestone and playful opportunity is a masterpiece, beyond words.