

ENGL1020: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Lincoln Caplan

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Michelle Cheon

Across the Universe
by Michelle Cheon '28

Jai guru deva, om.

Nothing's gonna change my world.

Those were the first words—or rather, lyrics—to greet us on our first day of calculus in Room 105. Mr. Yoon, standing at the front of the room with his slight, 5-foot 7-inch frame, black suit neatly pressed, had projected the lyrics to “Across the Universe” by the Beatles. As we shuffled to our assigned seats, we caught his amused gaze as he passed a stack of worksheets to fourteen disoriented freshmen.

He asked if we knew what the lyrics meant, his Korean accent cradling the syllables of *Jai guru deva, om*. We stared blankly.

“Glory to the divine teacher,” he translated, smiling at our collective ignorance. His voice, though soft, had a measured cadence, deliberate and magnetic. He traced the lyrics’ origins to The Beatles’ spiritual pilgrimage to India, where they had met Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1967.

He asked what we believed the next phrase meant, gesturing toward a line that had just floated from John Lennon’s voice through the speakers.

Nothing's gonna change my world.

He intended us to wonder: Is this line an appreciation of a moment’s peacefulness? Or a reflection of those who have surrendered to their unsatisfactory world?

But most had missed his question. I, like the other five in my row, was hunched over the worksheet, frowning at my attempt to find the third derivative of a mathematical expression that looped chaotically across the page. Above it, in bold, was the phrase “5-Minute Exercise.” The sound of chipping graphite was our only response to Mr. Yoon, as eraser shaving ant hills began growing in corners of our desks.

Looking up, Mr. Yoon wore a curious grin. He asked us to raise a hand if the problem felt more difficult than the summer homework. Fourteen shot up. Leaning forward, he paused at the last verse and explained that, as Lennon suggests, the only constant in our high school world would now be “Yoon’s math class”—the one challenge we could count on. The class fell silent, sensing the truth in his warning.

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Yoon was a man of routine. Barring fire drills and exams, he began each class with two songs from his 1,000-hour Apple Music playlist. His left hand would glide across the touchpad, scrolling through tracks, while his right hand expertly split a neatly stacked pile of worksheets, flicking one into each student’s hand as they walked through the door. By week two, there was an unspoken but understood rule: if you kept up with the class, the worksheet could be finished before the end of the second song.

No track was ever repeated. His playlist spanned from underground indie tracks with a 99% teenage girl fanbase, to Korean ballads and ten-minute classical pieces. On misty autumn mornings, he might’ve played the jazzy melancholy of “September in the Rain” by Dinah Washington, somehow likening the seasonal shift to the continuity of a function’s slope. Another day, “Rocket Man” by Elton John would elicit an impromptu twenty-minute discussion on

surviving in the total isolation of space before racing through a ten-minute lecture on AP Calculus Unit 4: Related Rates, punctuated by a chalk-drawn parabolic rocket.

The songs weren't just timers—they were preludes, each tied, in his mind, to the day's lesson. On the first day of senior year, he distributed the lyrics to “Tightrope” from The Greatest Showman, reminding us not to rush through our final year in our hometowns:

All an adventure

That comes with a breathtakin' view

Walkin' a tightrope

Yoon's sentimentality was his finest trait. Much of his history was ceaselessly circulated through teachers' gossip and student rumors. A Berklee College of Music graduate, he was a cellist who immigrated to pursue music. In college, he was a part-time math tutor for fellow international Korean students, having mastered linear algebra in high school. He believed calculus was unique in requiring an abstract understanding of concepts like limits and infinitesimals, rather than mere calculations. When students asked why he'd ultimately traded his instruments for math, his answers were evasive yet tinged with understated humor—something like “musicians need to eat, too”—which made his stoic demeanor all the more endearing.

Yoon rode a cruiser motorcycle to work and often joked about the two bullet holes in the front door of his apartment in Morningside Heights, in New York City. His unpredictable nature contrasted with his buttoned-up precision, with his bowl haircut and pride ribbon carefully pinned on his lanyard, signaling LGBTQ+ allyship.

My introduction to Yoon came long before high school; by sixth grade, I was hearing, “Wait until you take Mr. Yoon's class. You'll wish you were solving inequalities again.” The sheer difficulty of “Yoon's Calculus” had even birthed a local industry—downtown tutoring

academies proudly branding themselves as specialists in his curriculum, replicating his notorious problem sets and sourcing teachers from his most recent graduating class. To most students, Yoon's unnerving passion for polynomial series and vector fields was intimidating and exhausting. His thick accent, paired with a finer lexicon than that of our English teachers, often led to unclear analogies tying math to abstract anecdotes. But he had cemented his legacy.

For the past decade, all but one student of the hundreds he taught achieved a perfect score on the College Board mathematics exam, administered yearly to calculus students across the United States. Yoon's signature tutor program, which allowed students to earn extra credit by submitting proof of peer tutoring sessions, requiring him to review more than 200 emails a night—transformed the town. Librarians noted how the once-quiet public library had become a homework hub, while the town green buzzed with students streaming music and solving ten-step integrations. They would never appear on the end-of-year national exam, but would surely appear on Yoon's final.

By junior year, my friend and I were among the few to earn consistent As in his courses. Each summer, word spread, and parents offered us as much as \$60 an hour to tutor his material and \$200 for our math binders, filled with completed 5-minute worksheets.

I couldn't bring myself to sell my binder. Over my years in his class, Yoon became my senior thesis mentor and I'd grown to understand the intentions behind his teachings. To him, paying for an advantage was an affront to the very principles he sought to teach: math wasn't meant to be conquered through shortcuts; doing it justice meant understanding it deeply, by mastering the "why."

When the entire senior class failed a grueling multivariable exam, covering calculus in the third dimension, Mr. Yoon didn't scold us. Instead, he stood at the front of the room for

forty-three minutes, delivering a restrained reflection on his disappointment—not in our abilities, but in our lack of motivation to better ourselves. For some, he came across as overstepping. But I saw it how he meant it: as a reminder of our potential.

When I met with Mr. Yoon later that day to discuss my senior paper on modeling color theory, Fiona Apple’s “Paper Bag” played softly in the background. He paused, asking if I recognized the song. I did. He explained how, as a teenager, Fiona mistook a crumpled paper bag for a dove flying above her car. False security as a symbol of self-destruction. In that moment of vulnerability, I confessed. I’d earned a 54 on the last exam, with no excuse but laziness.

Rather than reprimand me, Yoon shared a sliver of his own story. As a college student hopping between basement clubs and jazz cabarets in Boston, teaching math in public high school had never been in his plans. Now, as our high school’s sole advanced calculus teacher, he spoke of music only through math, addressing a mostly disengaged classroom of teenagers. He mentioned how an unexpected school closure due to poor air quality had finally given him the chance to master the fourth movement of a concerto he’d been practicing for months.

Yoon made space for what mattered. Between grading-packed weekends, he supported student theater performances as the accompanist on the piano and memorized our favorite donut orders for breakfast before standardized exams. It struck me that unlike him, I often rushed through the tasks I enjoyed, treating them as distractions. He told me that through his twenty-one years of teaching, he had learned it wasn't about squeezing time for everything, but about giving each responsibility the attention it deserved.

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In the final moments of our last math class, with many seniors on the verge of tears, Yoon turned the knob on the speaker. Fiona Apple’s deep, haunting voice filled the room—her 1998 rendition of “Across the Universe.”

He offered a few carefully chosen parting words but mainly urged us to pursue what gave meaning to our worlds. As the song swelled, he let the same verse play on a loop:

They slither wildly as they slip away across the universe...

Jai guru deva, om

Nothing's gonna change my world

Nothing's gonna change my world

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