

## Good Gigs, Bad Gigs

### *Drumming between Hope and Anger*

The members of the TCLA performed constantly. Rev. Tom received a steady stream of requests for performances and was always making sure he had enough of us ready to cover the demands. He juggled who was available, the maximum or minimum number of people needed, the required skill level, and so on. He emailed a list of new requests to TCLA members every few days, and most Satori Daiko practice sessions ended with him going through the list of upcoming performances and asking who could go. Most of us were eager to play in public, but we had to consider not just the date and time but how long a drive would be involved, since most of us worked or were in school. See video 12, Rev. Tom Kurai and members of Satori Daiko discussing and volunteering for upcoming performances, August 2007, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>, for example: following an intense practice session on an August night and just before packing the van for an important concert the next day and a weekend of performances out of town, we milled around, simultaneously chatting, waiting, and responding (“I can go!”).

This is not a celebratory chapter about how taiko provides a key means of empowerment for Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans. My writing in the 2000s (Wong 2000, 2004, 2008) focused on that performative efficacy, and I stand by those publications. As time went on, though, I faced the reality that I sometimes performed in extraordinarily racist and orientalist venues with Satori Daiko. What are the ethnographic implications of participating in racist and racialized practices? How do performers deal with, address, accept, and critique the presentational frames within which they do their work? As cultural workers, taiko players are inherently engaged with knotty representational politics in ways nicely close to the ground. Indeed, they do their work in a particularly loud, sweaty, and athletic way, which is central to taiko’s attraction for me. I now roll up my sleeves on matters I have avoided in my more congratulatory work on taiko: how and why we perform in so many contexts and venues that are deeply

problematic, rife with orientalist framing, expectation, and determination, and whether the emphatically politicized Asian American body posited by taiko can be reconciled with the performance venues available to us. We don't always play at Asian Pacific Islander heritage-month events or at political demonstrations or at API culture nights. How, then, do taiko players address the space between intention and racist reframing? And how does this implicate the politics of grounded ethnographic practices?

Rev. Tom depended (in part) on taiko for his living, which raises the question of whether playing in preferred circumstances—that is, in contexts where a post-civil rights, post-Asian American Movement political sensibility can be assumed—might often be the exception, a privilege, and a tough way to make ends meet. More habitually, we played in fairs and festivals that were put on by corporate or civic institutions and self-consciously directed toward the promotion of a certain idea of multiculturalism—usually the flabby liberal version dedicated to having us all just get along and feel good while we think we're doing it, with ethnic food, music, and dance as an essential apparatus.<sup>1</sup> As an ideology and a set of institutionalized strategies, multiculturalism is deeply imbedded in late capitalist frameworks of value, so it is hardly surprising that the labor of taiko is co-opted by institutions that are not genealogically connected to social justice practices.

Japanese American taiko walks a certain line between new ways of being Asian American and more troubled histories of folkloric practice. Nostalgia for authentic Japanese practice is ever-present in taiko—in our costumes and in our efforts to connect to Japanese taiko masters. Yet Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans are not alone in our longing for authentic culture. The anthropologist Marilyn Ivy (1995, 55) addresses the power of nostalgia in postindustrial Japan, arguing that traditional Japanese material culture has a particular affective weight for the “new Japanese” (*shin Nihonjin*), the third postwar generation, who grew up “in an Americanized, affluent state in which certain things Japanese appear more exotic than products of western civilization.” These Japanese goods are literally called “nostalgia products” (*nosutarujii shōhin*) and are regarded as a kind of postmodern hip with elements of camp, kitsch, and the retro (56). I would say that taiko is not quite a nostalgia product but draws its power from the same ideological source. Ivy traces these newly commodified sites of the vintage as “mere” style (58), in the postmodern sense, back to the New Japanology, the resurgence of folklore studies in the 1960s and 1970s—which is, not coincidentally, when the kumi-daiko phenomenon took off. Ivy argues that folklore is possible only with the disappearance of the object of study—that its reconstitution as a textualized, “studied” object emerges only at the moment of its vanishing (66–67).

In this chapter I compare two events at which Satori Daiko performed, to lay out the wide spectrum of critical possibilities in which taiko players must be adept and to show how I attended to what my fellow taiko players said about their own multifocal awareness. On April 26, 2003, we performed at the annual Manzanar

Pilgrimage, a quintessentially Japanese American event that is as politically positioned as it gets. A year earlier, in May 2002, we were hired to play in a daylong dragon boat race in Laughlin, Nevada. I set up an unapologetically overdetermined spectrum here: the Laughlin event was outrageously racist, and the Manzanar Pilgrimage continuously reconstructs a fraught memory and operationalizes civil rights discourse as a racialized political strategy. I focus on how my taiko friends talked about both events because some of the most important political work that any of us do is often at ground zero, in the one-on-one interactions where we talk, don't talk, generate new means of response without having planned to do so, or make self-consciously strategic efforts to assert new spaces, new voices, and new choreographies.

#### PILGRIMS AT MANZANAR

The Manzanar Committee has sponsored the Manzanar Pilgrimage for over thirty years; it is all volunteer and incorporated under the laws of the State of California as a nonprofit educational organization. Many of its founding members were integrally involved in the redress and reparations movement that resulted in President Ronald Reagan signing an apology in 1988 to Japanese American internees for the violation of their civil liberties and an acknowledgment of the unconstitutionality of the Japanese American incarceration camps during World War II. Every year since 1969, several hundred people (mostly but not entirely Japanese American) from all over California and beyond annually come together at Manzanar—this dusty, remote place—to assert memory, anger, and a commitment to social change.

Playing at Manzanar was profoundly moving. The ten of us from Satori Daiko who made the two-hundred-mile drive into the Mojave Desert to do so knew it was a deeply important event, and it was doubly meaningful for us because Rev. Tom was one of the first taiko players, along with Kenny Endo, to perform at a Manzanar Pilgrimage, in 1975. Our participation in 2003 was thus part of a lineage, directly connected to Rev. Tom's founding presence. The incarceration camps and the reparations movement are centrally part of the Japanese American experience, and it is an honor for any taiko player to be part of this pilgrimage. Participation is a gesture of homage, memory, political placement, and commitment to continued social change. It makes you part of a much bigger conversation. Standing in the sun and the wind for several hours in the Manzanar cemetery, with the snow-covered Sierra Nevada mountains behind us and a crowd of at least five hundred people in front of us, was curiously intimate: we were so far away from everything, and the sense of being in a remote, isolated place was terribly strong. You knew that anyone willing to go to the effort of being there that day had to be pretty committed, so everyone was very informal and familiar with one another. You assumed that you shared certain things: sadness, outrage, injury, determination. The ritual of the event was prearranged, with quite a few former internees, by

then quite old, offering testimony of what it was like in the camps and reflections on how to think about issues of civil liberties in a broader, contemporary context. Musicians performed between the speakers (a folk-rock group, a Dylanesque balladeer, and the taiko players). The roll call of the camps included one banner for each camp carried into the cemetery, followed by a commemorative service featuring Shinto, Christian, and Buddhist priests. Many participants approached in procession to light incense and place a flower on the Manzanar monument. Finally, hundreds of dancers formed a huge bon-odori circle (see figure 24, Rev. Tom Kurai playing *odaiko* for the *ondo* at the 1975 Manzanar Pilgrimage, with the pilgrimage organizer Sue Embrey dancing in the right foreground, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). The experience didn't end there: it went on as we returned to our cars sunburned, windburned, and covered with the dust of Manzanar, and then followed the long dirt road back out to Highway 395. We saw small groups of people scattered over the empty acres of the site, many standing and staring at what little is left—cement foundations, rock gardens. Later, in the small, nearby town of Lone Pine, I was struck by the fact that all the motels and restaurants were full of Japanese Americans, and thought how odd, ironic, and triumphant that is.

We played. (See video 13, Satori Daiko playing “Aranami” at the Manzanar Pilgrimage, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>.) To play with that much history hanging on us! It was humbling, exhilarating, invigorating, inspiring. To play with Mount Whitney and the Manzanar monument looking over our shoulders; to play with those small, stony graves a few steps away. To play for a crowd that understood we were playing for a Japanese American political, historical, and cultural agenda—a crowd that wouldn't mistake us for “Japanese” or “oriental.”

Playing taiko at the Manzanar Pilgrimage was ideal: we had an informed, politically astute audience, with the understanding that we weren't on objectified display—there was no museum-like sensibility framing cultural meaning as authentic and contained—but rather were part of the fabric of the event and, more deeply still, were there to help generate a certain spirit of strength, assertion, and affirmation. In the Japanese American community, it's understood that taiko has performative effects.

The annual return to Manzanar is defined as a pilgrimage for several reasons. Pilgrimage is usually an act of worship, a means of enacting devotion by moving through space and place in ways that redefine both sites and the routes to them as sacred. Philip V. Bohlman (1996) and Paul Greene (2003) have theorized pilgrimage as a practice that maps sound onto movement and vice versa. The Manzanar Pilgrimage certainly does that: the program involves lots of music, and taiko is central to how a postincarceration Japanese America—both in and beyond the pilgrimage—is constituted and reconstituted. But questions remain: Why frame the movement as pilgrimage? Why juxtapose activist organizing with pilgrimage? Why even suggest that this remote site of transgenerational trauma somehow be a place of ritual memory?

None of the informational literature I have found addresses the genesis of the use of *pilgrimage* in relation to the camps—and in fact, *all* the incarceration camps are now annually revisited, remembered, and resituated in this way, under the rubric of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is more than a metaphor. Why visit Dachau or Auschwitz, Wounded Knee, Hiroshima, the museum of the killing fields in Phnom Penh, or the place in my town, Riverside, California, where a gay man was killed in a hate-driven knifing? To remember, of course, and to commemorate, but reinhabiting a site as a performative act makes memory into a political strategy.

Unfortunately, Satori Daiko spent most of its time embroiled in the nostalgia industry as defined by multicultural show biz. We swung pendulum-like between very different performance contexts. At one end of the spectrum was the Manzanar Pilgrimage. At the other were absurdly orientalist events defined by japonaiserie of the worst sort. In between were a range of engagements that, at best, contained elements of both extremes.

There are no pure spaces for Japanese American or Asian American self-determination. Still, the Manzanar Pilgrimage came close to being one: it defined the preferred outer end of our activities, an ideal location, audience, and Asian American performative possibility. Yet it teetered on the edge of a new kind of nostalgic redefinition. In April 2004, Manzanar was officially opened as a national park. This was the end of a long process of recalibrating meaning and acknowledgement, as acres of empty, federally owned fields were named California Historical Landmark #850 in 1972, then redesignated in 1985 as a National Historic Landmark, still known by hardly anyone except Japanese Americans, and then as a National Historic Site in 1992, and finally, under President Bill Clinton, made into a national park, with a visitor center, exhibits, interpretive trails, and the whole nine yards. Manzanar has become part of an official metanarrative about a benign nation-state that makes mistakes but is big enough to acknowledge them. This is a different kind of nostalgia than the heritage play of taiko. It reframes Manzanar as a place that we can visit to feel safely angry about social injustice because we already know the end of the story: that injustice was recouped. What was wrong was made right. The very fact of the national park bespeaks this and performatively makes it so. Manzanar becomes a nostalgic souvenir of this inevitability.<sup>2</sup> There are postcards (the souvenir par excellence), but what else? As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) argues for the museum and visitor center at Ellis Island, the nostalgic gesture is one of ownership and control, of folding troubled histories into a single story owned by all. Nostalgia renders it harmless, solved—a story with closure.

So it was poignant to play at the Manzanar Pilgrimage in April 2003, because evidence of the national park was already manifold, including the presence of more than a few rangers in khaki and olive drab. Two were at the entrance to the camp off US Route 395, stopping each car and ascertaining participation in the pilgrimage. And they were armed, as are many post-9/11 national park rangers. It shook

me up to be stopped by anyone in uniform at the entrance to this site of all sites, but then I was instantly embarrassed to be so affected—two knee-jerk responses in quick succession—because of course I recognize how essential the National Park Service is to the protection of tangible heritage. The next day, though, I met Mo Nishida, one of the original organizers of the pilgrimage and a central figure in the redress movement, now a wiry, suntanned man in his seventies, and he said it made him flat-out furious to find armed federal officials as gatekeepers of Manzanar. With nostalgia comes forgetting. Is that forgetting purposeful or merely thoughtless? Isn't thoughtlessness itself a performative act?

We played; we listened to the speeches; we joined the bon-odori circle that grew larger and larger as hundreds of participants joined in. Two of the head rangers were pulled into the dance, and they followed along gamely, awkwardly. To me, their participation—though well intentioned—was heavy-handed, unsubtle, and clumsily symbolic. It was a choreographic move from the ideological script of the multicultural festival, in which the culture bearers put on a show and then invite the audience onstage to learn a dance.

I have long insisted that I want to focus my research on Asian American self-representation, but in fact it's difficult to hold the line. Detailed works like James S. Moy's *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (1993) and Robert G. Lee's *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999) were central to the construction of Asian American studies because structural racism and orientalist praxis are (at least partly) the impetus for Asian American experiments with self-determination. William Wei (1993, 47–58) summarizes the problem of “selling out” when Asian Americans perform in popular culture. From the San Francisco nightclub Forbidden City (Dong 2002, 2008, 2014) to Philip Kan Gotanda's play *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1991), Asian Americans have continuously explored whether representation can be controlled in any way or at any level. Sometimes it seems like any Asian American cultural worker is always already co-opted until otherwise asserted. Between 1999 and 2009, Satori Daiko played in

- many, *many* multicultural civic events, such as festivals in parks or on main streets
- a corporate reception at the Staples Center in Los Angeles that sported an “Asian” theme, with young Asian American women dressed up as geisha, a sumptuous spread of Asian foods, huge papier-mâché Buddha images scattered throughout the area, and Whites as the majority of attendees
- numerous API history-month events on local college campuses
- a city-sponsored “night out” with no specifically Asian or multicultural theme
- a birthday party with a “Japan” theme at a private home, for a group of White American young professionals, who wore yukata, ate sushi, and toasted one another with sake
- the grand opening of a Japanese Mitsuwa supermarket in Gardena

- quite a few Lunar New Year festivals, from Chinese to Vietnamese
- the annual dinner sponsored by an association of API pharmacists who work for Kaiser Permanente (a large HMO)
- the grand opening of the Japanese American National Museum's new Pavilion in 1999

Some of these are of course completely heinous, which raises the question of why any self-respecting Asian American would agree to participate in them. As the historian and museum curator Jack Tchen has commented, "Sadly, part of what it means to 'become' American is to enact these racist traditions" (K. Chow 2014). Why did the members of Satori Daiko allow ourselves to be presented as fetishized commodities? Could we have refused to participate in the most appallingly exoticized settings? After all, the boycott has been one of the most critically informed gestures of refusal available to minority communities. Any boycott is powerful because it theorizes the connections between political presence and capitalism.<sup>3</sup> "Not buying" becomes "not selling out," and withdrawing capitalist compliance thus becomes metaphorically and *actually* an act of self-determination, even a sign that collapses the apparent space between theory and praxis or politics and commerce. It reveals the corporate capitalist base that defines spheres otherwise imagined to be purely in the realm of "culture."

My activities with Satori Daiko provided a gateway to both the best and the worst of the Asian American experience in Los Angeles. I had the chance to see the Japanese American community at work from behind the scenes, I had entrée to vibrant Asian immigrant neighborhoods through their public events, and I met any number of leading figures in the Asian American arts, but I have also seen the dark side of corporate multiculturalism *and* astonishingly old-fashioned yellow-face play and orientalist fantasy at work. At one level these spheres are separate, but at another they were joined together by my taiko group. We showed up and played the same repertoire regardless of the context.

The critical theorist Meyda Yegenoglu (2003, 2) suggests that an "ethics of hospitality" undergirds the logic that "allows" the work of immigrant labor forces and "non-normative citizens" of all kinds. She argues that liberal multiculturalism is a "regulative principle" that might seem to invite the creation of new kinds of democratic spaces but may actually prevent new political formations from emerging, by policing the very terms for presence. Drawing on the work of Appadurai, Hall, Dirljik, Spivak, Jameson, Žižek, and especially Derrida, Yegenoglu posits a "reorganization of diversity" that "revalorizes both the local and the global" while creating new conditions for containment (5, 6). She combines Žižek's and Spivak's ideas to show that liberal multiculturalism is central to the workings of global capitalism: difference has been resituated as somehow inherently resistant, making it necessary to reassert the relationship between difference and transnational commodity capitalism by "rethink[ing] globalization and the . . . valorization of particular identities as a double gesture of capital" (7). As Yegenoglu puts it, "[This version

of] multiculturalism is based on a disavowed and inverted self-referential form of racism as it empties its own position of all positive content,” allowing a “Eurocentric distance” that ensures the “foreclosure” of any other politics (11, 12). The trope of hospitality is central to corporate globalization because it establishes a tolerant welcome to the other while maintaining the terms and authority of the host—for instance, immigrant labor forces are welcome if it is understood that their presence, movements, and rewards will be limited. Discussing multiculturalism as “merely” an ideology that has swept through education and the arts ignores the crucial ways that it has enabled new global flows of goods and people that are channeled along prescribed paths. Whereas the corporate language of globalization emphasizes a free and open-ended circulation of capital, specific ideas of the “local,” “difference,” and “identity” are activated to circumscribe some movements, as well as to facilitate others. Some of the more atrocious circumstances in which my taiko group performed were not simply new forms of the old story of yellowface but rather imperialist choreographies newly reconstituted as a politics of entry and empathy.

The praxis of pilgrimage and the practice of taiko are conjoined activities that formulate and perform a politicized, assertive Sansei social aesthetic. Whereas taiko is a nostalgia product in Japan, Japanese American taiko is doubly constructed as both a practice imbued with a longing for roots, heritage, and authentic culture and, simultaneously, as part of the Asian American project of reparations and redress. These apparently contradictory purposes were both operative in the pensive work of playing taiko at Manzanar. Our participation in the 2003 pilgrimage drew on the nostalgic, originary power of taiko even as we offered commemorative gestures of refusing forgetfulness.

The absorption of liberal multiculturalist logic into the very means of performance has dreadful implications for the ethnography of performance as a utopian project. For me, there’s a lot crowding in on this, including Kamala Visweswaran’s important reconfiguration of fieldwork as homework; the phenomenological collapse of self and other that some have argued as a possibility for the ethnography of performance; and the feminist effort to resituate the inevitably asymmetrical relationships created by the ethnographic encounter.<sup>4</sup> I focus here on the ethnography of response, the ethnography of critical reflection, and an informed rejoinder to racist practice, racist containment, and racist master narratives. Becoming pilgrims helps taiko players remember; we assert memory through the noise of competing nostalgias.

#### FOLLOWING THE DRAGON BOATS

Taiko is consistently featured as a festishized commodity in the cynical play of corporate multiculturalism. Let me give you an example illuminating the challenges that are necessarily part of any attempt to opt out of commodity capitalism through boycotts or refusal.

The first annual Dragon Boat Festival in Laughlin, Nevada, was held on Friday and Saturday, May 10–11, 2002, and Satori Daiko was hired to provide orientalist trappings. I turn to this event with hesitation, because it's too easy an object of analysis; after all, anyone in Asian American studies is skilled at unpacking obviously racist practices—this is one of the first things we learn how to do in any ethnic studies course. Yet there's a certain pleasure in doing this kind of critical work, because the logic of racist representation is predictable, so the elegance and devastation of the critique are really the point. Five of us from Satori Daiko piled into Rev. Tom's van: Audrey, Lani, Elaine, Rev. Tom, and I. It's a long, hot drive from Los Angeles to Laughlin, which is a small town on the banks of the Colorado River, ninety miles south of Las Vegas. Like most Nevada towns, it's there for its casinos, which line the riverbank, one after the other.

The dragon boat races are a business. In this case they were overseen by FMG Dragon Boat, one of several such companies in North America that roll into town complete with the boats, paddles, life vests, and coordinating staff (including several emcees). The teams are made up of local folks who are essentially plugged into the event. (See figure 25, Dragon Boat Festival program, at <http://wonglouderand-faster.com>.)

FMG Dragon Boat uses the trope of team spirit to argue that dragon boat racing encourages group work and cooperation and that this, of course, has payoffs in the workplace. In Laughlin, the teams were mostly from the casinos: the Golden Nugget team, the Harrah's team, and so forth. A notable exception was the team of Las Vegas Metro Police officers (who were conspicuously fit and focused). The casino employees were doing their civic duty by contributing to this charity event, which was really a means to promote the casinos while encouraging the employees to have organized fun together (which would in turn up productivity). In short, the event combined a liberal multicultural narrative of celebratory difference; the paradoxical conflation of charity and the phantasmatic promise of the casino as a site of capitalist overabundance; a kind of participatory, Disneyesque, World Fair re-creation of other times and other places; and an exultant display of working-class spirit.

Each team consisted of twenty-two rowers and a drummer who sat at the prow and provided a beat for them to pull to. All the teams had come up with T-shirts decorated with dragon motifs, "oriental" fonts, and so forth. One team's drummer wore a coolie hat. Another team wore matching aloha shirts with hats of woven grass, and they marched to their dragon boat chanting "Ka-bunga! Ka-bunga! Ka-bunga! Ka-bunga!" which was clearly meant to sound strong/primitive/ritualistic/whatever. Yet another team wore matching Viking helmets with plastic horns. The prevailing logic connected the Chinese to the oriental to the primitive to vague, undifferentiated Otherness. Framing all this were the sports-bar behaviors of the teams and their followers. Howling and shaking fists in the air were a constant. The teams kept coming back to two kinds of chants: Queen's anthem "We Will Rock

You” and the time-honored GI call-and-response marching chant with dragon-appropriate lyrics. It was all about kicking butt.

We played taiko on Friday night for the opening festivities and then all day Saturday during the races, with a final performance on Saturday night for the closing ceremony and the announcement of the winners. It was hard work: we played for a total of five hours on Saturday, with lots of waiting in between, plus hauling the taiko back and forth between locations. During the races we had to maintain a big distance between ourselves and the dragon boats. In the first race we were too close, sonically speaking, because our “noise” interfered with the contestants’ ability to hear their own drummer(s), and an Arizona Wildlife officer told us in no uncertain terms to keep away from the races—he pulled up beside us in his boat and shouted this at us. Did I mention that we were on a boat? It was not a dragon boat: we performed on a small pontoon with just enough space for the five of us to drum while the driver steered and kept us moving. For the rest of the day we stayed a good half mile behind each race and then followed along, playing for people on the banks, all by ourselves on our pontoon. By the time we reached the end of the Laughlin Mile (and the last casino), towboats were pulling the now empty dragon boats back upriver for the next race, and our pontoon driver would turn around and likewise plow back up the river against the current to the starting line, where we would wait for the next heat to begin. Basically, we spent the day going up and down the same mile of the river, playing between races for the tourists watching from the banks and from casino balconies overhanging the river. By the end of the day I was tired, sunburned, and in a state of grumpy desperation from too many hours of invisibility and inaudibility in a panoply of orientalist excess.

The next morning before hitting the road, we went for a buffet breakfast at the Colorado Belle casino. After eating, we started talking about the experience and ended up having a very reflective conversation about how taiko is all too often inserted into seriously problematic events. The before night I had muttered something about the whole thing being orientalist in the extreme, and it turned out that the word was new to my taiko friends, but they immediately got the concept. They brought it up again after breakfast, and we spent quite a while just enumerating the many ways that the event was over the top: the facts that virtually everyone in the race was White, that we were kept out of their way, that the specific ethnic and national backgrounds of the dragon boat races and taiko were collapsed into the “oriental,” and so on. For my companions, our race was the metonymic point of departure: our “Asianness,” their “Whiteness.” I know that my taiko friends don’t believe their cultural authenticity lies in some sort of racial coding; rather, race was their shorthand for identifying what was so obviously and overwhelmingly wrong with the event.

We all agreed that we hoped we would be invited back, if we could change how we were framed. Rev. Tom’s livelihood was partly dependent on gigs, and this was an extremely good gig, at least in terms of the pay. But we didn’t like the way we had been kept at a distance or on the sidelines; we had been positioned as colorful

background activity. While we were treated with professionalism, we were always very aware that we were hired help.

I spoke with Elaine and Audrey several months later and asked them to reflect on both the Manzanar Pilgrimage (from which we had just returned) and the Laughlin dragon boat races. Both women were then in their midforties and were the unofficial leaders of our group, respected and looked up to for their vision and their skills, both as taiko players and in working with people. At that time, Audrey had been a taiko player for about fifteen years and was assertive and quite verbal (she still is). Elaine had then been a taiko player for six years but had studied traditional Japanese dance since childhood; she is quiet and thoughtful and often has extremely perceptive things to say. She immediately said that the Manzanar and Laughlin events were “like apples and oranges.” Audrey completed her thought, observing that “Manzanar was for pilgrimage—spiritual, memorial.” Both women described the experience of playing there as “uplifting” and further noted that they thought our presence there as taiko performers was meant to create that feeling and response in the audience. As Elaine put it, “We added to the spirit of the whole event. I think [the organizers] wanted us to create emotions: to remember the past, to look towards the future—I think they wanted that emotion there, and to keep the feeling ‘up.’” They agreed that we were at Manzanar for “a cause, a purpose,” whereas we were just “token Asians,” even “froufrou,” in Laughlin. Audrey said, “Laughlin was not fulfilling—it was probably one of the least fulfilling events I’ve done. The people watching us were just drinking beer, you know. It’s like we were token. It’s like that’s how they think Asians are. People were there to have a good old time and drink. But when we play at Tet festivals and other local Asian festivals, the people are there for *culture*. At Laughlin, they were just there for a good old time. The reason they came was completely different.”

The arc of connections between ethnographic effort, participation, and response is exactly what I think can serve as a located critical model, including and surpassing the ethnography of Asian American performance.<sup>5</sup> The critical gesture must exceed a simple refusal to be implicated (the boycott): it must acknowledge the troubled and inevitable power of othering narratives while effecting a ludic self-consciousness—a playful awareness that those narratives need not call us into being. That is why performance is a responsive site for such considerations: it offers nested, enfolded articulations of the status quo *and* interventionist vocabulary, often at the same time. I thus offer a grounded ethnography of performance and I attend closely to the particularities of time, place, persons, voice, and body, placing myself within the sphere of action and practice. The ethnography thus takes on the salient characteristics of performance: it moves, it has a bifocal consciousness and is twice behaved, it joins theory and praxis, it enacts the paradox of captured liveness. It allows mutual incursions. That means not checking out when the going gets racist, and it requires writing acquiescence as well as resistance. If it is an ethnographic leap of faith to get onto that pontoon and to drum in the wake of the dragon boats, then that’s where some of the most important and trying work may be done.