

Taiko, Erotics, and Anger

PLAYING

Taiko is a perfect social and musical space for me, and pleasure is at the heart of its perfection. Taiko was central to my social life and to my sense of myself as an Asian American woman. Let me offer you two moments in 1999 that, considered together, smashed open and revealed the relationships between taiko, pleasure, and anger.

Moment #1. The group I play in, Satori Daiko, is in rehearsal at Sozenji Buddhist Temple in Montebello, California, where we practice every Wednesday night. We have been working on the details of how to rise together from kneeling up to playing position in the middle of a piece, and it has involved painstakingly coordinating the speed of rising, the placement of the arms into ready position, and the small movements of the arms that get us back into playing position. We try it again and again, discovering more details that require coordination and agreement. Each time, another movement transforms into a single choreographed motion, while others are still a wave of ragged, separate actions. We talk, we argue different possibilities, and we try it again. I'm on odaiko, opposite Rocky; Elaine is nearby on chudaiko, directly in my line of sight. The seventh or eighth time we try it, I'm watching both Rocky and Elaine at once, and I notice that Rocky has risen infinitesimally faster than I have but that Elaine and I were synched; once up, all three of us move our arms together: *one-two-three-out!-five-six-back!-up!* We're locked in: we move as one. It is a small moment of perfection, and it breaks over me—a brief, intense burst of satisfaction.

Moment #2. Rev. Tom Kurai, Jacques,¹ and I have an outdoor noontime gig at a nearby junior college. Jacques is White, a native French speaker, and from Switzerland; he's an excellent rock drummer and has studied taiko for about a year. It's hot. We set up four taiko in the shade, on the grass under a tree. We have a forty-five-minute set—a long stretch when it's hot and there are only three of us to carry the show. We go through one piece after another; Rev. Tom talks into the mic between numbers, and Jacques and I shift around among different taiko

as he addresses the crowd. After a few pieces, I suddenly realize that Jacques isn't adding any *kakegoe*—I'm shouting by myself, since Rev. Tom is on the shime. We swing into "Shiawase Bushi," an upbeat festival number that involves lots of *kakegoe* and movement in between rounds when we are supposed to click our *bachi* over our heads while either dancing in place or in a circle or switching drums. Since there are only two of us, I automatically dance in place, and as I pivot in a circle, I catch sight of Jacques on *odaiko* behind me. He's just standing there—no dancing, no *kakegoe*, just waiting to start playing again. Afterward I ask him why. He says, "Well, Tom doesn't do it, so I didn't either." He knows perfectly well that a different standard applies to the shime player, who must keep the baseline going. I say, "But that left me all alone out there." He sets his jaw and looks at me challengingly. "Oh," he says, "so you're giving me a hard time?" Later, as I drive home alone, I vow to myself not to take any more gigs that mean being in close quarters with Jacques.

One moment of intense pleasure, another of anger and irritation. In rehearsal at the temple, we spent most of our time collaboratively working out the series of movements, and the cooperative effort was part of the social pleasure of playing together. This doesn't mean that the group is completely egalitarian: it isn't, nor does anyone expect it to be. Elaine and Audrey have an unofficial authority: whenever Rev. Tom isn't present, we look to them for—what? Not the final word, because that's not what they want to provide. They sense when we've reached consensus, and they call it. We wait for them to call it.

Irritation. Jacques felt that he wasn't required to shout *kakegoe* or dance: he regarded those things as additions to the "music," which for him meant (I think) hitting the drums. Nor did he like being questioned about what he chose to leave in or take out. He concluded that I was challenging him, so he challenged me back. This made me decide to avoid playing with him as much as possible.

Pleasure, satisfaction, anger, and resentment are all located within configurations of difference that are the bedrock of taiko in North America. In the early 2000s, approximately 75 percent of North American taiko players were women, and although this taiko scene was and is multiethnic, most of the practitioners were of Asian descent. For me, getting swept up in taiko had everything to do with gender and ethnicity: I have encountered few things as stirring as the sound and sight of Asian American women moving with coordinated strength, assurance, and discipline, and making a lot of noise as they do so.

I am watching a videotape of San Jose Taiko (1998) in performance, and there is something about this line of women moving in tandem, opening and raising their arms, lunging forward in choreographed joy, that calls forth an affective response from me. I watch, and I feel their movements in my own body. I experience no simple reflection of their power and joy—rather, they instantiate something that I would return to them if we were in a room together. I would shout *kakegoe* at them as encouragement. My heart rate quickens. Watching them makes me want to play.

Jacques is a White European man. Most of the members of Satori Daiko are Asian American women. Jacques was in his late twenties, Swiss, and a “drummer”—he played drums in a rock band. He was the one member of Satori Daiko who consistently didn’t get it. I could go on and on about how he didn’t get it. The point is, he didn’t, and it drove me crazy—and this has everything to do with how gender and ethnicity are lined up between us. White man, Asian American woman.

PLEASURE

Only certain areas of music scholarship discuss pleasure. Traditional scholarship locates pleasure in musical Others: in women, in people of color, in the queer, in the working class. The kinds of music that call pleasure forth are problematic: they are of the body, they delimit sites of possible threat and unruliness, and they are always, always devalued. Popular music studies is one of the few areas that consistently acknowledges and celebrates musical pleasure, regarding it as intrinsically part of many musics’ significance. Taking musical pleasures seriously is a radical move that signals anti-canon intentions.

That said, scholars are more apt to focus on the pleasures of spectatorship than on the pleasures of performing. I suspect that this is unwittingly based in certain understandings of how power and performance play out in the elite imagination—for instance, the performer is seen as controlling the situation and the audience is the receptacle for the performance. This logic leads to a focus on the pleasure of the audience, the spectator, or the fan, because this is the site where the performers’, composer’s, or choreographer’s intentions are realized. Critical work on spectatorship thus often focuses on revealing how fans’ pleasures are in fact resistant, which shows that fans aren’t passive but rather are embroiled in constitutive acts of interpretation. While all this has opened reception studies in fundamentally useful ways, empowering the spectator reinscribes the asymmetrical power relations of the spectator and the performer—whose relationship can be critically reclaimed only by investing the spectator with powers similar to those of the performer.

Reading the interviews in *My Music* (Crafts et al. 1993), I am struck by the abundance of sentences beginning with “I like” or “I love”; the forty interviews show that people *want* to talk about how and why certain musics give them pleasure, whether the pleasures of intense sadness or the voyeuristic pleasures of immersing oneself in a music video by Tina Turner (94, 157–58). Similarly, critical work on sports spectatorship offers some of the most focused considerations of fans’ pleasures, for what could be more unrestrained, unruly, and unapologetic than a sports fan? The emblematic sports fan is not only male and working class but completely over the top in his enjoyment.² John Fiske (1993, 82) presents a Foucauldian analysis of “sporting spectacles” in which the inversion of surveillance and discipline creates the terms of pleasure. Describing a stadium as an “inverted panopticon,” he suggests that fans’ peak experience is the rush of giving themselves over to

the moment, together, when the power of watching is reversed and knowledge is generated “horizontally,” within a group, rather than “vertically,” within the usual structures of hierarchical authority. The fans’ pleasure is both collective and experiential: “Crucial to sports fandom is an intensity of feeling, a passion, and a loss of control which are produced by an embodied way of knowing that is rooted in the body’s presence in the experience that it knows” (88). The intensity of collective pleasure is resistant precisely because of its base in body and experience, but Fiske also notes that “this localized power exists only in the spaces created by inverting an imperializing power-knowledge over others” (91). Fiske’s discussion of the power dynamics of pleasure provides a useful contrast to the place of pleasure in taiko: he ultimately seems to feel that sports fans’ experience of pleasure is an ephemeral response that does little to change the status quo, whereas I believe that Asian American women’s pleasure in taiko offers the terms for social change.

Wayne Koestenbaum’s work offers other parallels to the pleasures of taiko. In *The Queen’s Throat* (1993), he provides one of the most sensuous and slyly unfettered accounts of fandom to date, connecting the opera queen’s body to excess of every sort. He describes the act of listening as an intensely physical pleasure that joins gay fan to performing diva, and suggests a mimetic connection between them—a kind of listening that coalesces into participation, identification, and sensual pleasure all at once (31–32, 42). This link is unidirectional: the diva receives nothing in return from the gay listener; rather, she is in an exalted sphere of her own. Nonetheless, Koestenbaum describes a kind of pleasure that is posited on a real connection between performer and spectator and based in complete identification and shared experience, in which performing and listening become part of an interconstitutive whole that is deeply (homo)erotic.

GENDERED PLEASURE IN TAIKO

I turn now to the mysterious peak experience and the frustration of thwarted pleasure. Asian American women are drawn to taiko for real reasons: the construction of a body redefined as strong, disciplined, and loud works against overdetermined gendered orientalist tropes that position Asian and Asian American women as quiet, docile, and sexually available (Wong 2000). Taiko offers a compelling space to Asian American women because it posits an empowered collective social body in gendered and racialized terms. I refer to this deeply physical and profoundly political process as the erotics of taiko. Asian American woman taiko players tend to care passionately about taiko; they don’t just *like* taiko—they usually *love* it.

There are pleasures and pleasures in taiko. In rehearsal with my group, that small moment of complete satisfaction with beautifully synchronized movement is one kind: the pleasure of details well executed, in tandem with others. Then there are the pleasures of collaboration and discussion. The other kind of pleasure is the rush you get only in performance, and we are all familiar with it. We know

when it happens. It is both private and public, lone and shared. It is mysterious and addictive. We talk about it because it feels so good when it happens and because we know *how* it happens, but explanations are adequate only up to a certain point.

The peak experience is a moment of pronounced, intense feeling that marks a good performance. Taiko is high-energy—this is one of the first things that anyone would notice about it—but the specific form that that energy can take fascinates the taiko players I know. We talk about it. It is called *ki*, and it is central to taiko and to the Japanese martial arts. I asked two of my classmates—both women—to talk about it with my tape recorder present, and I would like to share our conversations; these words were informed by shared experiences over several years.³ Both Harriet and Beverly are Japanese American women who were raised as Buddhists, which informs their ways of thinking about taiko; I will come back to this point.

Harriet Mizuno-Moyer is a Sansei woman who was then in her midforties; her then-eleven-year-old daughter, Taylor, was also in the group. I caught Harriet during a break in rehearsal and asked her to talk about how and why taiko feels good to her, and she said it was a matter of energy:

Deborah Wong: What does it feel like, that energy?

Harriet Mizuno-Moyer: It's not like an exercise energy, where you tire yourself out, running around the track, or aerobics or something. It's not that kind of energy. When you're hitting the drum, and your hits are all at the same time, it's almost as if that energy is coming back at you. So that's different, because you're getting something in return, somehow, whereas when you're exercising, you're not getting anything back in return—you're just expending energy! When you hit the drum, it seems to me like feedback, where you get more energy. It's more of a mental than a physical energy, for me. . . . If it were just physical, it would tire you out so you couldn't play. As that song's going along, and it's really cooking, you almost feel like you have more energy as that song goes on—but then when it ends, you go, Oh gee, I'm really tired! [*laughs*] So I don't know if it's the same kind of energy as exercise energy. I don't know what it is—if you would call that mental or . . . I don't know. Maybe a little bit of both. . . . A long, long time ago, I used to play tennis, and I used to play every single day. After about a year of this, I finally got to the point where my serve felt just really good. You could feel it . . . I never attained that level in very many other things, but I remember what that serve felt like going in, every single time. It's the same type of thing—it's a real high feeling. But it takes so long to get there! I feel really lucky, because I'm not very athletic, to have that feeling. You hit that ball, and you know it's going to go in. It's the same with taiko: you get that sort of high.

Harriet outlined the energy-pleasure principle as regenerative and both physical and mental: it arises from the emotional and kinesthetic satisfaction of practiced

activity. Her description of it as a kind of “high” is similar to Victor Turner’s (1986, 54) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) formulation of “flow,” an ideal state of “total involvement” that is utterly and intensely satisfying.

I asked Beverly Murata to describe the connection between energy and the group. She is a Sansei woman who was then in her early fifties and had played taiko for about fifteen years.

Beverly Murata: When you’re really in the groove—when the whole group gels—you have more than the sum of your energy. You feel each of your individual energies, but when it’s all joined together, it’s more than just the sum. It all comes back to you, and it gives you 125 percent of the energy. And then you feel a real connection between body, mind, and spirit. But that’s when it’s really together—that’s the ideal state. You know when it hits—the group knows it. It’s a group consciousness by that time.

Deborah Wong: How do you know it?

BM: It just—everything clicks. It falls into place, the timing’s on, everybody’s at the same level of energy—it becomes a group level of consciousness at that point. It’s more than just an individual thing.

DW: What does it feel like, physically? Can you describe the sensation in your body?

BM: It’s almost like there’s no separation between the mind, body, and spirit, for me. Everything just becomes one unit, so you’re not thinking about what you’re doing, you’re not telling your body what to do. It’s all one total unit. It’s kind of like: spirit comes into your body, flows through, and it’s out. So it’s all at once, it’s everything. It’s almost like you don’t think any more. [*pause*] Yet you do. It’s like total consciousness without mentally thinking, if that makes any sense.

DW: That’s not a contradiction in this case.

BM: No. It’s like the Zen thing: when you get to that mental state where it’s just peace, oneness, and energy flowing. So there’s no separation between the different aspects of who you are.

Beverly drew certain distinctions between the circulation of energy within the individual performer, between members of the group, and between performers and audience. However, she noted that the exchange and expansion of energy was similar in all three cases. I asked her if the physicality of effort and exertion had anything to do with it:

DW: Are you aware of your heart going *thumpity-thumpity-thump*?

BM: Yeah. Oh yeah! And you’re sweating—you can’t breathe! [*laughs*] I’m talking about the *peak* experience. If it goes on, then you’re really tired and your muscles start aching and all that, but I’m talking about when you hit

that peak, that's what it's like for me. It's a oneness. But those other things happen too! Oh yeah. [*We both laugh.*]

DW: How long does, or can, that peak state last?

BM: It's hard to say . . .

DW: Can it be fifteen minutes, or is it just a flash?

BM: It varies. It depends on my energy level. When you're actually on during a performance, it's a little easier to sustain, because there's an energy exchange with the audience. It's like a cycle. You give out, and the audience gives to you, and it flows around—it's a cycle. So it's easier to sustain that energy level, whereas [during rehearsal] you don't have that exchange from the audience, so it's a different flow. And then you have audiences that are duds. It's audiences that are really excited that create that energy. You can feel that difference too.

Many of the Asian American women I know who play taiko describe that kind of peak experience in similar terms: they say that their most pronounced moments of pleasure emerge from the interaction between performers or between performers and audience. It goes further: many Asian American spectators describe a similar response. At UC Riverside, one of my colleagues, a Sansei scholar, told me that watching or listening to taiko has always been a singularly powerful experience for her, and her comments suggest that the exuberant pleasure of performers' peak moments is communicable. My colleague has known taiko for most of her life—growing up in the Bay Area, she routinely heard San Jose Taiko at the annual Obon celebration in San Jose's Japantown—and she said that as far back as she can remember, it has called forth a nearly unbearable excitement in her, as well as responsive tears. The upwelling of strong emotion that goes along with watching or listening to taiko has always been part of her experience; it doesn't last through the whole performance but surges up in response to the arc of pieces that sustain and carry forward long-repeated rhythmic and choreographic sequences. Her strong emotional response suggests that we need to reconsider the "vicarious": the cresting waves of power and pleasure are confined to neither performer(s) nor spectator(s) but rather move dynamically and synergistically between them.

Key moments of pleasure are thus moments of power, but for most of the women I know, power in taiko is not situated along vertical lines of authority (as discussed by Fiske; see above) but is generated by collective action. In the Euro-American experience, pleasure is usually associated with the sensual—with the body—but Harriet and Beverly each described a kind of exuberant, transcendent pleasure that did not rely on the mind-body divide for its power but rather issued forth from the connective synapses that blurred mind-body, performer-audience distinctions: the dynamic loop between those binaries apparently creates the potential for the kind of peak experience that taiko players live for, and that experience is transcendent in the Buddhist sense, not the Western Romantic sense.

Several elements are necessary if that peak experience—that joy, that most sublime pleasure—is to make its appearance: a receptive audience, and an ensemble of taiko players working together as a group.

In Satori Daiko, there was a fly in the ointment, a bull in the china shop. Perhaps Jacques was there to clarify the terms of my perfect social space, because he disrupted it: he often ruined my perfect space when he was in it. Jacques was a good musician and a bad taiko player. He was a rock musician—a “drummer”—so he had a strong sense of meter and rhythm. But he tended to disregard the things that make taiko more than drumming: kata, kakegoe, the group social aesthetic, and the devaluing of personal ego. One of the most experienced members of the group said to me privately that she thought he was a drummer, not a taiko player, and this is one of the more dismissive things one taiko player can say about another. Jacques had a bad kata or none at all, depending on how you look at it; he virtually never added kakegoe; he didn’t bother to learn many of our pieces, preferring to be given flashy solo moments when he could improvise; he didn’t spend much time socializing with the group—he left when the rehearsal was over, if not before; he challenged anyone beside Rev. Tom who had authority in the group. I left some rehearsals and performances in a complete silent fury over him. Getting to me was part of his disruptive power. He messed with my pleasure and thus made me angry: he prompted a rage in me that could have consumed us both because it emanated from dangerous intersections that are gendered and racialized.

You can understand my rage only if you understand my pleasure. These specific moments of anger and irritation circled around one member of our group—a White European man—who periodically challenged the value system that maintained the terms of pleasure for the Asian American women in the group. I know I was not alone in my outrage, but I run up against the ethical limits of both friendship and ethnography at this point: the group social aesthetic was so strong in our ensemble that it took us a long time to begin talking among ourselves about Jacques’s disruptive presence. I won’t tell you what my classmates said, nor can I tell you what went on in Jacques’s head, though an ethnography of failed understanding, and of the dangerous differences that made my taiko group an imperfect utopia, is now visible.

Anger indicates where strong values are being challenged; anger tells you where to listen if you want to know what’s really going on. Black feminist critics like bell hooks (1996) and June Jordan (1992) address the profound feelings of rage that are interpolated with their passion for social justice. Writing about rage is risky: it too easily spills over into shared territory with fighting words, and Patricia Hill Collins (1998, 79–94) argues that the performative (and legislative) effort to prevent effects by silencing insults is, in the end, conceptually limited—“censuring selected elements” (87), as she puts it, simply reinscribes and duplicates powerful binaries. Moreover, the targets of hate speech are most apt to respond not with violence but with “anger, flight, and silence” (85).⁴ Jacques’ words and behaviors may seem

insignificant—he didn't really do anything except insist on having his own way. I reacted as if to fighting words, with anger, flight, and furious silence. The depth of my outrage was triggered by the fact that he was a White man; it takes a White man to *not* get it in the ways that he didn't; did he not get it *because* he is a White man?

When Jacques asserted virtuosic solo drumming over unison group drumming and refused to be absorbed into the cooperative aesthetic that deemphasizes ego, the Asian American women in Satori Daiko responded with frustration, irritation, and (in my case) fury that he meddled with our pleasure. Pleasure raises the stakes, and this troublesome White man's resistance may well have stemmed from his own awareness that the gendered and racialized terms of my/our pleasure defined his exclusion from it—and part of his pleasure lay, possibly, in his rejection of our terms. For me, writing this was an act of critical reclamation and grudging recognition that his encroachment on my pleasure created alternative sites of gratification which were politicized in troubling ways. Nevertheless, part of my pleasure in taiko lies in exploring its politics through the performative act of writing—and by writing my irritation with this man.

Two years after I vowed to stay out of close quarters with Jacques, Rev. Tom created a small group-within-the-group. One night in October 2001, he simply told Rocky, Gary, Jacques, and me to start coming an additional evening each week to rehearse so he could create some new works. The four of us were the ones in Satori who had “musical” training—so we could play complicated rhythms at fast tempos. Working closely with these three men presented me with all sorts of new challenges: they were so pleased to be playing complicated rhythms at fast tempos that, to my mind, they became, well, guys playing drums. The faster and more accurately the four of us played, the less I sometimes felt like a taiko player. They stopped maintaining kata and they didn't shout kakegoe; they just played fast and loud.

But then Jacques started growing on me. He had questions. He wanted to know more about the nature of ki, and he asked Rev. Tom about the “taiko spirit,” a thing referred to frequently by practitioners that sums up the value placed on group effort, putting the group before yourself, placing your trust in the group. He was asking about the right things. Soon it wasn't as easy for me to complain about him. Taiko's values were rubbing off on him. He was changing, or taiko was changing him: it began to resituate his White/Swiss/rock-drummer subjectivities. Angela Ahlgren (2018, 83–110) writes about White presence in the North American taiko scene with depth and perception, addressing how some White players learn about Asian American history through taiko, how others wield the disruptive power of White fragility, and how “whiteness interrupts audience expectations” (90) in productive, anti-orientalist ways. Jacques was not immune to taiko's social aesthetics.

North American practitioners must continually address challenging issues around material identity. The big questions of identity politics are played out through the body, and this creates real vulnerabilities. For me, Satori Daiko was a utopian space perpetually teetering on the edge of complete compromise. We

wrote new pieces and argued over how far we could go before we would no longer “really” be a taiko group. That’s not taiko, Audrey says, that’s just drumming. OK, we say as we gather together, what if we do it like *this*?

Pleasure is thus political. The social aesthetics of pleasure may be exalted or gritty, a matter of gatekeeping or immersive inclusion, but they simultaneously maintain and construct the terms for relational power and are thus no simple thing. Music isn’t always about pleasure, nor is pleasure always rooted in the sensual body, which is why ethnographies of pleasure are important and necessary. Taiko in Asian America redefines women’s bodies and positions gratification as a collective endeavor. The erotics of taiko rewrite difference and authority and choreograph the relationships between the sensual, the mind, the autonomous spirit, and the disciplined body. If I vanish into the sweat and ache of loud collective effort and Jacques stands aside, whose pleasure is the more acute?

GLAMOROUS WOMEN AND TRANSNATIONAL FEMININITY

I was a fan before I ever saw them play, let alone met them in Japan. A friend gave me their poster, knowing that I was interested in gender and the taiko tradition, and I kept it on my office wall for quite a few years.⁵ These women were saying something about femininity and taiko, and they were stunningly glamorous. Those costumes, that attitude! *Honō* means “fire” or “passion” in Japanese; *daiko* means *taiko*, or “drum.” The group’s name could also be transliterated as “Honoo-Daiko,” with the prefix *o* before *Daiko* meaning “big” or “great.” Honō Daiko is an extraordinary Japanese taiko group, and I reflect here on an encounter between it and my Southern California taiko group in 2001 that suggests the construction of an Asian and Asian American feminism through taiko. How taiko empowers women is at once more compromised and more interesting than most practitioners will allow. Forms that draw on essentialized signs challenge the narrow, perilous space between reinscription and social transformation.⁶

Glamour is charisma with style, magnetism with panache, and allure with élan. Women with feminist glamour have style, confidence, and answers. They’re way past messing around with conventional ideas of beauty. They say what they think, and what they think is that the power structures defined by gender relations still need work, at both the micro and the macro levels.

When we met Honō Daiko in 2001, Satori Daiko had seventeen members, twelve of whom were women, as was quite typical for North American taiko groups. At that time, about 75 percent of all US and Canadian taiko players were women, and most of them were of Asian descent. Most North American taiko groups were made up of both men and women, though a few were all female by design.⁷ None of us in Satori Daiko had feminist glamour, though I know that some women in our audiences have felt differently. Few if any of Satori’s members self-identified as

feminists, and many did not want to acknowledge the shaping force of gender and race in our group, or in taiko generally. Part of taiko's North American mystique is its connection to multiculturalism and the fact that it can be learned by "anyone." It is understood that one absorbs interesting and useful things about Japanese culture in the process of learning taiko, including the values of self-discipline, respect, and cooperation. This ethos makes it hard to face up to difference.

In August 2001, Satori Daiko went on a two-week taiko tour of Japan, led by Rev. Tom. It was the first of several such trips we took with him. We went to taiko festivals, had workshops with notable taiko performers, and visited taiko factories. It was an extraordinary experience, but it was not unprecedented: we all understood its purpose, because other North American taiko groups have done it too.

The globalization of taiko has taken place along an inner circuit of understandings. First, taiko is always already more "authentic" in Japan than in Asian America, which Japanese, Japanese American, and Asian American taiko players tacitly understand. North American taiko players make the journey "back" to Japan to partake of that authenticity and cultural capital. It's an aura that rubs off on you, even if the taiko tourist has previously only attended festivals as a spectator. Even in simply witnessing at the site of the source, one is understood to have been transformed and to "know" something more about taiko than North American practitioners do (or can). This journey staggers under the weight of its colonial baggage. It is troubled by a curious neo-orientalism, defined by exoticism, and imbued with primitivist longing. Its genealogy is directly tied to the history of the Asian martial arts in the West: we will go sit at the feet of the taiko masters, just like every single one of the Karate Kids and every Euro-American martial arts action hero. We will accept their teachings without question. They will be stern and strict, and they may ridicule us, but we've seen the movies, so we know the drill.

The movement of taiko study-pilgrimage is unidirectional. North American taiko groups go to Japan in search of authentic knowledge, but Japanese taiko groups come to North America only to teach or tour, not to study.⁸ Much is at stake in maintaining a clear center of "the tradition." As the ethnomusicologist Linda Fujie (2001, 94) has written, however, the Japanese ideological origins of kumi-daiko are complex. She notes that taiko is a post-World War II phenomenon that quickly became a national symbol. She describes how, in the early 1970s, a group of university students gathered around the musician Den Tagayasu, the founder of Ondekoza, and, as she succinctly puts it, "the *taiko* drum became the center of an experiment for young urban Japanese, many of whom were disillusioned with the competitive, materialistic world of postwar Japan and were searching for some deeper meaning for their lives." She describes their efforts to create "a kind of social and cultural utopia around the drum and drum playing" which was based on certain ideas of the "traditional" and traces their reworking of Japanese instruments and musical material for the stage in ways that troubled some of the very "traditional" musicians from whom they claimed to have learned (96). Not

only did they skirt the traditional system of instruction (close, sustained contact between teacher and student), but they quickly became regarded as culture bearers of “traditional music” as they joined the international circuit of festivals and concert halls. Fujie describes their ties to traditional Japanese folk musics as “exaggerated to some degree. Taiko groups create the aura of centuries-old historical tradition and present themselves as bearers of this tradition” (97–98).

The slippage between taiko as a sign of the national (“Japan” and “Japanese culture”) and as a sign of diasporic ethnic heritage (Japanese American culture and history) sets up pesky possibilities for misunderstanding and devaluation. Some Japanese players view diasporic Japanese American culture as inauthentic and watered down. Naturally, Japanese American and other Asian American taiko players see things otherwise: through the lens of the Asian American Movement and with an understanding of diasporic identity construction as dynamic and ongoing, they view North American taiko as related to Japanese taiko but ultimately different because its history, placement, and cultural functions are necessarily distinct. Fujie focuses productively on the relationships between the local, the national, and the international (in the sense of international concert and festival production) in Japanese taiko; if you consider that the same interlocking network of loci are at work in North American taiko, and then that Japanese and North American taiko are in close interaction, it’s clear that the dynamics of located and imagined meanings are entangled indeed. North American groups draw on a body of representational practices that are similar but not equivalent to those of Japanese groups, and their investment in the “traditional” overlaps with that of Japanese groups but ultimately has a very different weight, in the context of anti-Asian North American colonial histories of discrimination, containment, assimilationist cultural policies, and so forth.

This ponderous representational work is passed back and forth between Japanese and North American taiko players. In that exchange, orientalist and exoticist signs are recirculated. Samurai values provide an orientalist imaginary for both the Japanese and Westerners, in which the Tokugawa era (1600–1868) is configured as quintessentially premodern and precapitalist. In taiko, a twentieth- and twenty-first-century educated urban middle class on both sides of the Pacific conflates shared orientalist understandings of “Eastern” praxis with Buddhist values and Bushido (the way of the warrior).⁹ Taiko isn’t only a nostalgic museum for imagined Tokugawa-era practices, however. Its postwar identity puts it in traffic with the commodification that is part and parcel of the international performance circuit: when Kodo and other Japanese taiko groups go on concert tours, they export traditional Japanese culture. They perform tradition, though the nostalgia on which audience enjoyment relies is not the same in Japan as in the First World West. As Marilyn Ivy (1995, 245) notes, the Japanese nostalgia industry busily fetishizes and reifies key concepts even as this very process “reveals the presence of a wish: the wish to reanimate, not simply fix, the past at the moment of its

apparent vanishing.” Taiko is an exemplar of this process: its practitioners are more than historical reenactors.

HONŌ DAIKO AND THE SAMURAI BODY

During our trip through the taiko tradition in Japan, Rev. Tom arranged for us to take a workshop at the Miyamoto studio in Tokyo, home of the chief taiko-making rival to Asano Taiko Company. The teacher, a famous middle-aged master musician named Kiyonari Toshi, was one of the founders of Sukeroku Taiko and was trained in *hayashi* drumming. He spent a lot of time addressing our clumsy, undisciplined American bodies. He promoted a sternly still, controlled stance (*kata*), and he thought we all moved our hips too much: he made his point by swishing across the room in a parody of queer effeminacy, all loose hips and wrists. As the group lesson went on, he said to several of us, “Forget you’re a woman!,” though it wasn’t clear (to me, at least) what that might mean. Play more stiffly and less fluidly, more strongly and less softly, more assertively and less gently? Something like that.

Our encounter with Honō Daiko was at the other end of the gendered taiko imagination. Honō Daiko is a professional group of three women taiko players. It was founded in 1985 by Akemi Jige, who has remained in the group while other members have come and gone. Honō Daiko was eventually hired (full time) by Asano, which makes some of the best taiko in Japan. The three women play pieces they compose themselves, which are characterized by complex, driving, asymmetrical rhythms (like 3 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 2); close, turn-on-a-dime coordination of parts; exquisite timbres and dynamic utilization of their drums; and breathtaking physicality.

Their athleticism jumped out at us. Those bodies! Their performance instructed us in a new way to watch women’s bodies with pleasure. This wasn’t a scopophilic pleasure of eating up their bodies with our eyes: we were enjoying their arms and shoulders, not T&A. For a taiko player—particularly a woman taiko player—watching the movement of muscles in their arms, shoulders, and backs was mesmerizing, and it generated a deep desire to look like that, to play like that, to move like that. Nor was it like watching women body builders who heft iron like men: the women of Honō Daiko played with grace, flexibility, and expressivity, realizing the metric and synergetic complexity of their pieces with their bodies. Jige said, “We don’t use a lot of *furi* [movement, or flourishes]. We play naturally, according to the body. You should learn pieces so that your body knows them. We use a lot of concentration and focus and energy.”¹⁰

Ahlgren (2011, 199–200) attended a Honō Daiko performance in Michigan in 2011, about which she writes,

As the house lights fade and the stage lights come up, the four women who make up Honō Daiko sweep onto the stage in their bright red gauzy costumes and mesmerize

us with their virtuosic performance. Rather than the happi coats, aprons, and tabi that many taiko groups wear, these performers wear tightfitting sleeveless tanks with thick straps that criss-cross in the back and red skirts that flare dramatically like long tattered ballet tutus when they take their wide, barefoot stances. The small but imposing women—two with short, spiky hair and two with hair piled atop and spilling from their heads—stare out at the audience aggressively while their hands fly across the drumheads.

Although I do not know anything about these performers' identities, their performances certainly invite feminist and queer spectatorship. The drummers—two very feminine and two with androgynous looks—ooze sensuality, their torsos literally undulating as they took turns playing the large odaiko center stage. As I watch one performer arch her back impossibly far during a solo, I can see two girls who performed with the kids' class in the front row, flinging their bachi into the air and swaying unabashedly along with Honō Daiko's thrilling performance. Beside me, Clare sits amazed, and whispers, "I've never seen anyone *move* like this before!"

Jige did not go the folkloric route of seeking out "traditional" teachers (as Kodo and Ondekoza did). Her first teacher was an old man in Fukui-ken, where she grew up; she learned the basics from him, but after that she was on her own. Nor has she (as far as I can tell) tried to establish herself as a sensei, a teacher, a transmitter of "traditional" knowledge. She is a full-time professional performer—one of very few taiko players who have such a postfolkloric occupation in the New Japanese world of nostalgia products.

The three members of Honō Daiko are Asano employees, on the Asano payroll to show off their drums. They are not the babes seen in US car commercials: they aren't mere accessories, because they actually *drive* those drums—they haul right into fifth gear in a matter of seconds. They showcase Asano's beautiful merchandise, and they are basically part of Asano's apparatus of domestic and international commercial success. They rehearse in the Asano studio on weekdays from 10 AM to 5 PM. We spent three hours with them at the Asano main factory. They performed for us in Asano's drum museum before teaching us drills focusing on particular techniques and then a new piece (see video 14, Satori Daiko workshop with members of Honō Daiko, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>), after which we got to ask them questions for half an hour.

Honō Daiko's remarkable costumes stand out dramatically in the wistfully nostalgic world of "traditional" taiko clothing. Costuming is not a mere appendage to performance, and stage clothing of any sort carries deep symbolic and historical meaning.¹¹ Honō Daiko's costumes provide a striking angle on the relationships between gender, tradition, and a woman's body redefined by taiko. As I described in chapter 2, most taiko groups, whether in North America or Japan, wear costumes based on traditional Japanese festival clothing.¹² Honō Daiko has put a lot of thought into its costumes, using them to draw the eye to the players' bodies in certain ways while allowing for fierce movement. As Jige said, they have had

several of their own costume designers, including a woman and now a man who designs some of the accessories on their clothes.¹³ Jige has been centrally involved in generating ideas for their costumes. She explained, “Rather than being beautiful or pretty, we wear costumes that show the arms on purpose, because that’s very visual—to see them moving. It’s easier to move our arms too!” All their costumes expose their arms, shoulders, and backs. They often wear tank tops. But whereas their tops are all formfitting, their lower bodies are often enveloped in trousers or pantaloons that enlarge their body space and create a sense of being bottom heavy and massive. Their black satin trousers evoke the bulky pants known as *hakama*, which originated as an outer garment to protect samurai warriors’ legs from brush when riding a horse.¹⁴ Samurai in the Tokugawa era wore clothes that created an enlarged body, or a silhouette that extended the boundaries of the body, without adding a lot of additional movement through swaying cloth (in the way that certain ball gowns are meant to extend and amplify dance movements, for example). When the women of Honō Daiko wear *hakama* with tank tops, the effect is dramatic because it suggests samurai drag—women wearing warrior men’s pants—but this is mediated by the decidedly un-samurai-like exposure of their unadorned upper bodies. Shawn Bender (2012, 157–60) writes at length about how their manager at Asano Taiko hired a designer to provide the women with freedom of movement—unlike the women in Kodo and Ondekoza, who often perform in confining *yukata*—and to draw attention to their muscular upper bodies.

The *odaiko* is the only drum played with one’s back to the audience and, even then, only for solo pieces. Such works—like Kodo’s “*Odaiko*,” whose display of the male body is discussed below—self-consciously put the performer’s strength and stamina on display. Honō Daiko usually includes an *odaiko* solo as part of its program, and in this case the women simply follow the masculine conventions for spectatorship: cover the lower body but wear tops that expose a large part of the back. An *odaiko* solo piece is the most deeply gender marked of all repertoire, which has made it the focus of extra effort from a few women taiko players.¹⁵ If some of Honō Daiko’s costumes redefine the female body in masculinist terms, one set of their stage costumes takes risks (less successfully, I think) in the other direction. I have seen photos of Honō Daiko members performing in formfitting white tank tops and huge, gauzy white trouser-skirts, almost bridal in effect. I have seen these costumes only in photos—never in performance—but they clearly combine the evening gown with the same principles of exposed upper body and covered, massive lower body as Honō Daiko’s other costumes. In this case, however, the effect is self-consciously feminine, even referred to as “dress design” in the group’s press materials. In one photo, Ayano Yamamoto carries off a striking combination of muscled strength with a bodice that seems designed to outline one breast. The image’s effect relies on its resemblance to black-and-white glamour shots of the 1930s–1950s, but its surprise lies in the no-shit directness of Yamamoto’s gaze and the drumsticks in her left hand. What at first appear to be

evening gloves are in fact tekko, bands that provide support to the player's wrists. She's ready to hit the stage running.

The bodies that Honō Daiko's costumes define and display are not mere frames for clothing but rather additional fields for reconfiguration and experimentation. These women are ripped: they are impressively muscled—read: strong—without crossing the line into drag (if a reconfigured musculature can be considered a kind of drag akin to that of clothing). Honō Daiko's members do not seem to equate muscled strength with the masculine. Or do they? If their sartorial play with gender crossing is in conversation with Japanese haute couture, then their staging of the woman's body is genealogically linked to other cross-gendered forms of Japanese drama (Morinaga 2002; Robertson 1998).¹⁶

Although women are the overwhelming majority in taiko on both sides of the Pacific, the advent of a small, virtuosic, professional all-woman ensemble was a new development. Honō Daiko's emphasis on bodily discipline is striking, and two of the four members of the group since its inception have had the short hair, direct gaze, and glamour of Takarazuka's *otokoyaku* (women who perform male roles in all-female revues). I have no idea what their sexual orientations may be, or whether their fan base attaches a same-sex erotic charge to their public image. Still, the confluence of their muscled strength, mastery of the male domain of the odaiko solo, and musical chops puts them in a league all their own.

During our Q&A session, I asked Jige what she thought women bring to the taiko tradition. (See video 15, Q&A between Akemi Jige and Satori Daiko, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>.) She replied:

When I first started, there weren't that many women in taiko, but as a woman, I wanted to play. I wanted to play the big odaiko. So when I first started Honō Daiko [in 1986], there were two women playing, and when people saw that, they were really surprised by it. That's the way it started. It wasn't a conscious thing—I just wanted to do it, and then another woman joined me. They used to make fun of women, so that's why we tried harder—we trained hard. We started out playing at hotel parties—private parties—but little by little, people started to appreciate us.

Generally, a man's body is not as flexible as a woman's—men look stiff when they play.¹⁷ *Chokusen* is a rigid way of playing. [She leaped to her feet and bent backward as if playing a tall odaiko.] *Kyokusen* is fluid, flexible.¹⁸ Some men are able to do this [play in a *kyokusen* way], and they look really good when they do. And when you play that way, visually it looks better, and you can play with more speed. If you're too rigid, you can't play very fast. And it looks better. From the audience's point of view, it looks like that person is really struggling [if they play in a *chokusen* manner]. But if you're using *kyokusen*, it's more fluid—it's more dynamic, visually, it's more beautiful.

Jige didn't explain whether she thinks this is a matter of nature or nurture, but she clearly believes that there are real and very evident differences in men's and women's playing and that women's *kyokusen* is preferable: it looks better and it allows you to

play better. Notice that she mentioned the way it looks no fewer than five times in six sentences: she clearly prioritizes the visuality of performance and the pleasure of the gaze. She is trying neither to emulate nor to put on the body of a man, even if she uses essentialized categories of choreographic essence to make this point.¹⁹

Bender (2012, 161–69) suggests that the gender balance in Japanese taiko might be shifting toward more women participating, with more and more amateur and community groups that are 50-50 men and women, even though male standards about the taiko body and authority remain the norm. He notes that the “tightly bound femininity” of the women members of Kodo and Ondekoza may be on its way out, but audiences still bring strongly gendered expectations to bear on performers, wanting women to be cute rather than strong and sometimes responding to Honō Daiko’s strength, power, and volume with distaste (162).

SATORI DAIKO’S WOMEN BACK AT HOME

We left the workshop a bit star-struck and full of ideas for new pieces. Honō Daiko’s fluidity, controlled power, and *style* had us all rather enthralled, even the men. The assumption that women’s groups sacrifice power and precision for a kind of feel-good, inclusive, amateur enthusiasm remained unspoken, but an alternative model was suddenly in front of us, and it left us both humbled and thoughtful. There are only a few Asian American or other North American women in taiko even remotely like Honō Daiko’s members, and it bears asking why, though I acknowledge Tiffany Tamaribuchi, Kristy Oshiro, and Raging Asian Women as North American examples of women who play taiko at a professional level with unabashed strength. The transnational movement of taiko and the valorized practice of the taiko study tour put me in a place to consider alternative kinds of women’s performance. Compromised though it may be, taiko is the primary site for my own experiments with an embodied feminism of performative sound and movement, and the intersubjective possibilities of performance in an era of globalization are precisely what afford this space its potential. The intersections of the local and the global—the Japanese local, the Asian American local, and the brief confluence of these two spheres through the study tour—met at the site of Honō Daiko’s performing bodies.

My friends in Satori Daiko did not normally spend a lot of time thinking or talking about gender. One of the four men in the group routinely disseminated outrageously sexist jokes to the rest of the members by email. My open interest in such matters was the target of bemused joking and occasionally outright dismissal. At the workshop, when I asked Jige about the presence of women in taiko, one of the Satori Daiko members (a woman) teasingly said, “That’s a very Debbie question!”—in other words, there she goes again.

This changed suddenly and dramatically in the summer of 2002. A reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* contacted Rev. Tom: she had discovered that the majority of

taiko players in North America are women, and she decided this would make a good feature. Rev. Tom referred her to me, and she openly located her interest in the topic in her own Chinese American identity and courses she had taken in Asian American studies. She attended one of our rehearsals, where she spent quite a bit of time interviewing two mother-daughter pairs in the group, at my suggestion. The resulting article was both informed and astute, and it had the effect of allowing and even encouraging the women in Satori Daiko to think about gender as a central force in the group and indeed their lives. The pleasure of appearing in a major newspaper and the resulting attention from admiring colleagues and friends opened up a space for thinking about taiko and gender, and I got the strong sense that the reporter's ability to draw these women's experiences into a certain configuration was surprising, affirming, and thought provoking for them. For instance, the reporter asked probing questions about whether any of the women were contradicting gendered behaviors instilled by their parents, and one member had a perfect example:

When LizAnn Shimamoto was 12, her mother forced her to take an etiquette class, where Shimamoto learned all the things a "good girl" should be, how to be "ladylike" and "mild-mannered" and above all, quiet.

Now, at 39, Shimamoto yells.

She yells while playing the odaiko, a drum roughly the size of a refrigerator. She yells as if she's sending a message across the Grand Canyon. She yells because it gives her a sense of power, because it's fun and because it encourages her fellow drummers—including daughters Amy, 14, and Grace, 11—to keep the beat. Of the 18 performers in Shimamoto's group, Satori Daiko, 13 are women. It's a breakdown reflected in Japanese drumming, or taiko, groups across North America: About two-thirds of the roughly 150 taiko groups are composed of women, especially Asian American women. Many of these women have snatched up bachi, or wooden drumming sticks, to rediscover their roots—and to redefine their roles as women.

"What we're doing is contradictory to what a Japanese female has traditionally been taught to do," said Shimamoto of Monterey Park. "It's a mirror of what's happening culturally."

Once "extremely meek and shy," Shimamoto plays taiko with a grin on her face as wide as Julia Roberts'. She moves her feet wide apart. She raises the bachi as if they were nunchuks and pounds the cowhide-covered barrel. She pants. She sweats. And of course, she belts out an occasional kake-goe, or yell, to support her daughters. (Chan 2002)

After that, my friends frequently made comments about "woman power." In our pre-performance huddle at an outdoor festival a few months after the newspaper article appeared, one woman member shouted, "Women of Satori!" and several others responded, "Yeah!" This cautious step toward an explicit feminist understanding of taiko was a sea change.

Having spent so much time looking at the body and its trappings, it is worth returning to the fact that the members of Honō Daiko are musicians and make

music. Without divorcing the bodily politics of taiko from its sounds, Honō Daiko's repertoire focuses tightly on a kind of virtuosity distinct from that of the loud, massed "power taiko" that defines most community-based ensembles. Honō Daiko's technique—both the command of complex rhythms and the kinesthetic control of timbre and dynamics—is strikingly and deliberately different from the spirited but inexact playing of most amateur groups (i.e., the clear majority of taiko groups on both sides of the Pacific), setting this ensemble apart as extraordinary. Honō Daiko has a foot in a different world—the world of the "professional" musician, the "trained" musician, and all the status markers that follow—resituating its musical product and practitioners as part of the classical arts, in contradistinction to the folkloric.

Taiko practitioners' uncritical valorization of tradition and our circulation of neocolonial feudalistic imaginaries are integrally part of our celebratory story about ourselves. Yet I would not dismiss these attitudes as invented, quaintly sexist, or "merely" enacting nationalist projects of folkloricization in the global arena. Our gender politics are conflicted. Taiko practitioners, overwhelmingly women, are routinely inserted into male costuming and absorbed into master narratives of a feudal (read: patriarchal) past. Taiko also offers liberatory possibilities for choreographing new kinds of gendered, racial, and ethnic identity. These contradictions are frustrating, seductive, and exhilarating. It may be necessary to unfetter ourselves somatically first, then intellectually—to enact what's envisioned before it can be articulated.²⁰ Jige said, "Learn pieces so that your body knows them," even as she was redefining that knowing body hard at work in the transpacific arc of memory and movement.

ASIAN AMERICAN MASCULINITY AND MARTIAL ARTS

The Japanese martial arts shape taiko indirectly but powerfully and persuasively. Taiko and martial arts each move back and forth across the Pacific continuously, through film industries, the imaginations of spectators, and the bodies of practitioners. Some men address Asian American masculinity through taiko and martial arts. Some Asian Americans study martial arts, but many, many more follow them in film, especially Hong Kong genres. Rev. Tom loved Japanese films about samurai, and he believed this shaped his moral universe and his relationship to taiko. I explore how martial arts–inflected values percolate through taiko, though this connection isn't always obvious or direct. In one notable case, though, it was quite direct. Taiko practitioners believe martial arts values are part of a certain teacher's legacy, and I address their sometimes conflicted opinions about the power and influence of that legacy. Finally, I consider the links between some Japanese approaches to taiko and their relationship to ultranationalism.

I have already argued that taiko offers new ways for Asian American women to come into voice and to assert a new bodily awareness; I turn now to how Asian

American men performatively redefine themselves with taiko, through the thicket of interrelationships between taiko and martial arts.

HE'S HUNG

In 2004, my then-thirty-eight-year-old cousin Eric sent me an email: "Oh yeah; speaking of AA stereotypes, that whole William Hung thing with *American Idol* just had me cringing!!! (I don't watch that drivell but I heard about it on the news.) I thought, this guy just set the perceptions of Asian males back an entire generation. Engineering student? Buckteeth? Nerdy fashion? Speaks with a slight accent? Yep, this is the frame of reference for all of middle America now. And of COURSE the Fox network purposely picked this guy cuz he DID fit the stereotype . . ." In early February 2004, the UC Berkeley student William Hung appeared on *American Idol*, performed the Ricky Martin song "She Bangs," and went down in flames. He was a caricature; he was a nightmare of Asian male stereotypes. The judges laughed at him. He was the self-image that all Asian American men carry in the back of their heads: nerdy, awkward, ridiculous, unattractive to women, and so on and so on. Yet his failure on *American Idol* gave him an unexpected fame. Almost immediately, websites devoted to Hung sprang up, celebrating, commemorating, and mocking him (sometimes all at once), replete with video clips, photographs, further news and information. Hung became a celebrity: in the wake of his internet fame, TV talk shows and record producers began to pursue him. The narrative inevitably comes around to the stereotype that all Asian men have small dicks. Hung was being idolized, but why and how weren't completely clear. Was the joke on him and expanded to supersize? This was the revenge of a public that knows they too will never win on *American Idol*—an uprising of losers everywhere, an identification with Hung's emblematic everyday unglamorousness (Meizel 2009).

The Western gaze configures Asian and Asian American men through a constellation of race, gender, and sexuality: they are effeminate, castrated, demasculinized. David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and a flood of critical work on it critique the historical processes that established Asian men as not-masculine and the contemporary practices that maintain this trope, including an endless parade of popular culture representations that repeat, reenact, and reify it.²¹ A great deal of scholarly effort has gone into unpacking the historical patterns of labor migration and American legislation that created the Asian or Asian American man. As David Eng (2001, 17) writes, "Asian American male identity is historically and increasingly characterized by critical intersections in which racial, gendered, and economic contradictions are inseparable." It is a short distance from the feminized occupations of laundry worker, houseboy, and cook to the bottom that the Asian or Asian American gay man must always be. Maintaining Asian and Asian American men as always less than masculine contains a perceived threat to the US workforce: the Chinese coolie and the Japanese CEO are both forever overrunning

the American economy. The emasculated Asian or Asian American man is thus a key strategy in the management of US ethnic minorities, just as the hypersexualized African American man was a key strategy for justifying the twentieth-century lynchings that used terror to contain an emergent workforce.

L. H. M. Ling's (1999, 283) virtuosic exploration of global "hypermasculinity" offers critical tools that can be used to consider the confluence of gendered values within taiko in Asia and North America. She borrows the term from Ashis Nandy (1988), who notes how colonizer and colonized together generated "a reactionary, exaggerated form of masculinity" in India as British authorities feminized the disenfranchised ("women, the poor, homosexuals"). On the other hand, the West perceives economic development in the Asian Third World as aggressive, controlling, authoritative, and masculine, and Ling argues that postcolonial rejections of the West's emasculating force have deepened rather than rethought such tropes of hypermasculinity. When many Asian countries emerged from World War II, successful modernization, industrialization, and globalization was conceived in hypermasculine terms, even when built on the foundation of readily available female labor forces. The neocolonial dynamic behind a postcolonial response is full of internal contradictions yet still powerful. Ling views the Asian acceptance and reenactment of hypermasculinity as fallout from colonialism. As Asian countries assert new structures for economic self-determination, they sometimes rely on gendered models of development. Still, the old binary of the West versus the rest is no longer clear. As Ling writes, "The Other under global hypermasculinity is not outside, alien, or policeable but inside, familiar, and all too unmanageable. Put differently, global hypermasculinity brings 'in here' what's 'out there'" (299).

So there are several stories about Asian and Asian American masculinity and several ways of responding to the stories that are out there and all too many ways to understand how colonial and orientalist ideas about Asian nations, cultures, and people are gendered, sexualized, and racialized. The means of response cannot be disentangled from the master's tools, but redefining the terms requires memory, pleasure, awareness, fandom, movement, and organized rejoinders. Taiko offers all that and more.

TAIKO IS OUR BRUCE LEE

On February 12, 2004, Rev. Tom and I were eating lunch and talking about taiko, samurai flicks, and rehearsals when he suddenly declared, "Taiko is our Bruce Lee!" I provide a detailed biography of Rev. Tom in my book on Asian American performance (Wong 2004) but revisit his personal history here to explore why he loved samurai films. (All of Rev. Tom's remarks in what follows are from my interview with him over that lunch.) His father was a Japanese-born Zen Buddhist minister, and his mother was a Kibei Nisei, an American-born Japanese educated in Japan. Rev. Tom was born in Japan in 1947 and emigrated to the US at the age

of five (in 1952) when his father was given a position at a Zen Buddhist temple in Los Angeles. He was thus technically an Issei but had the sensibilities and political views of a Sansei, though he was bilingual and in certain ways bicultural. He played and taught kumi-daiko continually beginning in the late 1970s and spent 1980 to 1983 in Japan studying traditional folkloric music and dance. Rev. Tom was in his thirties when he decided to follow his father's example and become a Buddhist minister; he was probably the eighth or ninth generation in his family to take on this calling, and he supported himself through a combination of taiko teaching, taiko performance, and Buddhist ministry.

Between the ages of six and about twelve, Rev. Tom watched Japanese films with his father almost every weekend in local movie theaters. They went to the Linda Lea theater most often, on Main Street in downtown Los Angeles (see figure 26, Linda Lea movie theater in downtown Los Angeles, 2004, at <http://wonglounderandfaster.com>). They both loved *jidai-geki* (period films) but followed *chambara*, swordfight samurai movies, most avidly. Young Shuichi—as Rev. Tom was then known—liked everything about chambara: the stock/repertory actors used in film after film made by the Toei Company, the great costumes, the soundtracks of modernized, orchestrated minyo (folk music) and enka. The formulaic nature of the plots was also a source of pleasure: the hero gets into trouble, must take revenge on someone, and at the end makes a long speech about what the bad guy did and why he, the hero, has no choice but to respond. That long speech was a high point: Rev. Tom remembers that it was often delivered “in Kabuki style! Very stirring!” and preceded the final struggle between the hero and the villain. Chambara movies were about chivalry and honor, no matter what the class of samurai. The setting was usually Edo, old Tokyo. Shuichi liked the clarity of the chambara moral universe. Reflecting on it, Rev. Tom said, “I never really examined Bushido . . . but I knew what it was, from the subtitles.” He remembered that as he got older (when he was in junior high), some chambara had darker themes: films that were critical of Bushido, about generations upon generations of lordly abuse of retainers and the ethical dilemmas created by these abuses. Rev. Tom said, “When I was a kid, I used to play with swords, pretend I was a samurai. I also liked westerns and had a cowboy outfit, toy cap pistols . . . Unconsciously, I liked the idea of justice, you know? Justice prevailing. In a lot of the stories, the underdog wins, finally at the end, and I guess I related to that aspect of it. Coming to this country and not knowing English, I felt kind of inferior and self-conscious.” Chambara and the American westerns of the 1950s had deep genealogical connections through the international film industry, of course, but in this case an immigrant boy was drawn to both and performatively played at both. He had comic books with samurai characters and trading cards with cowboy characters.

He got involved with the Asian American Movement when he was in his twenties and saw that the implicit class code of Bushido conflicted with the movement's radically democratic ideals. Rev. Tom joined Kinnara Taiko in Los Angeles in 1976

at the age of twenty-five, less than a year after he first played taiko in the Manzanar Pilgrimage. He said that Rev. Mas Kodani, the head minister at Senshin Buddhist Temple in South Central Los Angeles and a founder of Kinnara Taiko, once told him that one of his inspirations for becoming a taiko player was watching the film *Muhomatsu no issho* (*Rickshaw Man*; 1958, directed by Hiroshi Inagaki), in which Toshiro Mifune is the poor title character, who also plays taiko in the Gion matsuri.²² In other words, Rev. Mas—a notable and influential American taiko teacher—had been deeply influenced by the depiction of a Japanese taiko player in a Japanese film. Mifune is of course an iconic figure, inextricably linked to the image of the cinematic samurai. One cannot watch Mifune playing a humble rickshaw man in 1958 without simultaneously seeing filmic shadows of him as a ronin, a rogue samurai: a certain overlayering of affective understanding takes place as Mifune carries forward his earlier roles into his modest rickshaw man so that the honor, strength, and determination of every samurai he ever played are channeled into our reception of him as a drummer in Gion. Relating the film to his own experience, Rev. Tom told me,

Before going to Japan, I had an image of what I thought a taiko player was: I thought they represented honor, and they were like the new hero of Japan. . . . My ideal image—though not my inspiration—of a taiko player was [the Mifune] character in that movie. It was kind of a replacement for my hero, the samurai. There was no way I was going to become a samurai, right? Besides, I got politicized and found it wasn't that cool to be a samurai, so being a taiko player . . . Of course I wasn't thinking about it like this, but now I'm reflecting that I do feel kind of like a hero, a role model, as a taiko person.

When he became more seriously involved in the Japanese American reparations movement and the Asian American Movement, the caste system that defined samurai culture began to look different to him—feudal, and in fact not cool at all—so he sought out social justice values in other practices. I asked Rev. Tom whether there was any remaining connection between taiko and chambera, samurai, and Bushido for him. He answered, “But I do feel something when I'm playing—something that covers my entire *being*. And it's something . . . from that culture, from Japanese culture, that I feel.” I asked, What *is* that? He said, “I feel inside—it's the energy, the *ki*. I'm pretty sure, though I never had any discussions with martial artists, that it's the same thing martial artists feel when they do their thing. Because I feel a sense of balance. It's a good feeling. You can see it in other people, whether they have it or not, even beginners, if they have it or not, or the potential.”

Samurai, taiko, films, and ideas of honor and justice are interwoven and represent a circulation of values and images back and forth between Japan and Asian America for more than a century. The border is there only to be crossed again and again; nothing stays still.

BROTHER BRUCE WAS ON MY WALL

I have thirteen Chinese American first cousins—eight men and five women—born between the early 1950s and the early 1970s. I asked them by email to tell me about Bruce Lee: was he a hero to them, was he a role model?²³ Suzanne, a bit older than I, responded to my initial query in a matter of hours:

[My brother] Kevin still regularly takes Seattle tourists to where Bruce Lee is buried.

I don't remember posters around our house, but we were the few folks that watched *The Green Hornet* so we could see Cato in action . . . & especially the episode of Batman where they were guest "heros" . . . & he beat up Robin!

Some Asian Americans watch and listen to American popular culture—films, television shows, music, and so forth—searching for the presence of Asians and Asian Americans, keeping our eyes and ears open for the occasional or fleeting presence of Asian American faces and voices. We attend to them when they appear, and since we know that these appearances are likely to be brief and contingent, we learn how to spectate *against* certain mainstream, racist American understandings of how and why they're present at all. If Cato was unfortunately just another Chinese houseboy in certain ways, well, *we* knew that he was "really" Bruce Lee under that chauffeur's hat and that he was going to kick the crap out of the bad guys.

My cousin Eric also responded immediately to my query. Lee meant and means a lot to him:

Very interesting topic. VERY fascinating man. The answer is YES, brother Bruce was on my wall. As his books and bios, etc., are on my shelf. . . . In fact, there is a poster of him in my office CUBICLE. He remains some sort of archetype for me, lurking somewhere in my unconscious levels. I thought about this before, why the appeal, why the fascination with ol' Bruce. Sure, the destruction of the weak Asian male stereotype has a lot to do with it.

But there is the sheer magnetism of his presence. No doubt, if you see any of his films on the BIG screen, not a videotape or DVD on a TV set, you can definitely see there was something charismatic about him. Plus, I found the philosophical aspects of his art, his Eastern influences and spirituality, to be something that helped me feel some sort of connection to really being Chinese. Sure, that sounds strange, but as a pre-teen in the 1970's, knowing that you were different and one of the few minorities in the neighborhood, it helped build a sense of pride. . . .

I never consciously wished that I were white so I could fit in better or to make me feel that I was fully accepted. . . .

Even into my 20's, Bruce still had me fascinated. I read more of his books that were published by his family. I'm STILL fascinated with the guy to this day. If a new book comes out, I may or may not pick it up, but I'm always interested. No doubt, he is/was a role model for the PHYSICAL awareness of self. He was an incredible specimen of fitness, complete with this raw, powerful energy in his graceful movements. Let's face it, he was a badass. Half the movie theater would be full of black kids, who

really loved him too. It wasn't an overstated machismo, but it was the epitome of masculinity in some respects.

Eric was openly trying to find a way into “really being Chinese,” because at that time—the 1970s—any authentic sense of the Asian American was still emergent. While he explicitly identifies the issue of physicality and physical presence, he also notes that he didn't want to be White, nor did he look to White models of machismo. At the same time, Blackness is part of his memories: the African American teenagers who were there in the theaters with him. Yet he apparently didn't look to Shaft or Superfly (African American action heroes of the time) for models either. The crossover occurred in the other direction, with young African American men looking to the Chinese martial arts for new ideas about strength, power, invincibility, and justice. Amy Abugo Ongiri (2002, 36) has written at length about how African American men idolized Chinese martial arts figures in the 1970s. She argues that African American audiences “wanted to see the underdog win through a differently articulated body politics that stressed discipline, restraint, and self-determination rather than a cartoonish display of brute force” like those featured in many blaxploitation films of the period. Lee and the huge number of Hong Kong martial arts movies offered heavily mediatized ideas about a feudal past and an uncomplicated world of honor with clear principles, generated by a film industry framed by late colonialism, high global finance, and late Cold War anxieties. Vijay Prashad (2001) acknowledges the orientalist fantasy driving African American empowerment through mediated martial arts but still views this type of spectatorship as the beginning of an Afro-Asian political formation that represented a new kind of coalition building at a moment when it made all the difference: he emphasizes the ethnic-political bridge that he believes martial arts formed between Asian Americans and African Americans in the 1970s. The play of representation thus ran deep in that movie theater where Eric and those African American teenagers looked to Lee for ideas about how to be strong, how to triumph as the underdog, and how to stand up to injustice.

My cousin Matt, then in his early forties, wrote back with similar memories. He too referenced the experiential importance (in a prevideo era) of going to movie theaters and watching Lee in an interethnic context:

i was a huge bruce lee fan.

at about 9 or 10 yrs old i used to go with my dad and [my brothers] nu and kim to the summer film festival at the u[niversity] of mich[igan]. students were gone for the most part, summer kids, locals, but it usually was full. i think it cost \$1.50. that was maybe in '71 or '72.

'enter the dragon' is the one I remember the most. he kicked chuck norris' ass bad. and chuck was bigger physically.

that was very empowering to a 9 yr old chinese kid. i was an ABC [American-born Chinese] skinny pip-squeak who took ymca martial arts. i remember getting a

t-shirt with bruce lee printed on it in his famous 'enter the dragon' pose in front of some snake shaped graphic twisting like dna. it was the bomb to me. . . .

i continued to go to the movie fests each summer and usually they showed a number of bruce lee movies, and i went to as many as my dad could stand. when he died rumors flew—kick to the head, natural causes—i was crushed again. today i live in san francisco close to haight st. where lots of young culture brews and blooms, i can still see bruce lee t-shirts on the kids now. to me he was my symbol of attitude, courage, confidence. and one of my very few heroes.

to this day i have back at home in mich. in my childhood home posters of bruce, nunchucks (real ones!) on the wall, silver stars (for fighting!), and even some nunchucks i made in wood shop at my jr. high school—they didn't know.

Twenty-five years later, my cousins Matt and Eric both look back to their preteen fascination with Bruce Lee and talk about it in terms of their formative identity as young Asian American men. Like Suzanne, Matt remembers an emblematic moment of Lee beating up a White man—and in each case, not a White villain but rather an authoritative White hero (Robin, Chuck Norris). In these moments, the status quo slipped a little, temporarily but noticeably. Lee resituated racial hierarchies of which my young cousins were already aware, and what's more, Matt and Eric understood that he was doing it *for them*, as Chinese American youth thinking about masculinity. Further, both have moved on in certain ways. Just as Rev. Tom realized that samurai culture doesn't transfer perfectly into Asian America, my cousins recognized the limits of their fandom . . . but the latest biography may still be purchased, and the posters and nunchucks haven't been thrown away.

Of course, Lee is, and perhaps has always been, so thoroughly and powerfully mediated that some can see Asian American men only as simulacra of him, reversing the distinctive ways that Asian American men become stronger through spectating by recasting them as inevitably Asian rather than Asian American and as irremediably foreign and exotic. Rev. Tom wasn't into the martial arts or Bruce Lee. He did study kendo briefly as an adult, but that was mostly to accompany his young son to lessons.

Deborah Wong: Did you have a Bruce Lee poster on your wall?

Rev. Tom Kurai: [*laughs*] No! But I thought he presented a very positive image for Asian American men. I mean, I wasn't distraught over his death, but I thought it was a sad thing—I thought, Gee, that's too bad. [*pause, remembering*] In fact, I was picked up by a Black woman because she was a Bruce Lee fan. This place called Baby Lions where [the Japanese American jazz band] Hiroshima used to play, a nightclub. And we went to see a martial arts movie, just one date.

DW: How long did it take for you to realize why she was interested?

TK: Well, I knew from that first date.

DW: [*I'm in stitches. I can't stop laughing.*]

TK: She kept talking about Bruce Lee: Do you do karate, do you do kung fu, and I just said [*in a small voice*], No, I don't.

JAPANESE HYPERMASCULINITY

Tanaka Seiichi, or Tanaka-sensei, as virtually all North American kumi-daiko players call him, was born in Tokyo in 1943 and emigrated to San Francisco in 1967.²⁴ He studied the martial arts extensively in Japan and then took up taiko in his twenties, first with Oguchi Daihachi of Osuwa Daiko and later with the renowned group Oedo Sukeroku Taiko. In 1968 he founded his own dojo, where he taught martial arts and then taiko, and in a remarkably short time his taiko classes had filled up. Tanaka-sensei is regarded as the father of kumi-daiko in North America; some of his best students, now middle aged, were originally members of San Francisco Taiko Dojo and have since established their own kumi-daiko groups based to differing degrees on his philosophies and methods. Tanaka-sensei represents the most explicit pedagogical pairing of kumi-daiko and martial arts (social) aesthetics in North America. He is an exemplary transborder subject but in very different ways from Rev. Tom.

Stories and anecdotes circulate about Tanaka-sensei's teaching methods.²⁵ He is known as tough and demanding in ways perceived as authentically "Japanese": Tanaka-sensei has exceptionally high standards, and these standards are drawn from the Japanese martial arts. He places a strong emphasis on correct kata and on drills. His teaching philosophy is explicit and codified:

THE ESSENCE OF SAN FRANCISCO TAIKO DOJO

GRANDMASTER SEIICHI TANAKA FOUNDED SAN FRANCISCO TAIKO DOJO IN 1968 BASED ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF UNITY OF MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT. INFLUENCED BY CONFUCIANISM AND HIS TRAINING IN THE CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS, HE EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGOROUS PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL TRAINING.

心 - KOKORO

In martial arts, seika tanden is considered to be the central force of KI energy and is located about three fingers below the navel. KI is the life energy that must flow from the performer to the drum. Another important concept is I or mindfulness/consciousness. Both I and KI must come together for taiko to have life and expression. . . .

技 - WAZA

Tanaka Sensei believes in preserving the oral tradition of passing songs on through words. Taiko songs are not learned through a notated score. Playing taiko is an act of communication. When taught through words like "don" and "tsu-ku" the passing

on of songs is also an act of communication. By speaking the song, the spirit of the song can be conveyed. Ultimately, the sound of the drum must communicate this spirit. . . .

体 - KARADA

Physical strength and endurance is important. Running, push-ups, sit-ups, finger crunches and other exercises are necessary to develop power and stamina. Dojo members repeat basic drills over and over. However, strength training is never separated from training of the spirit. “When you have played with all your strength and you feel tired, that is when you can truly begin to play, tapping into the energy deep within you,” teaches Tanaka Sensei.

礼 - REI

Basic communication always begins with a greeting. At San Francisco Taiko Dojo, students learn the importance of greeting their instructors and each other when meeting or taking leave, with an energetic “Ohayogozaimasu” or “Oyasuminasai”. Taiko students always bow to their teachers and when entering or leaving the dojo, a place of study and discipline. The bow and the audible greeting convey appreciation and respect. The attitude is vital when approaching the drum.²⁶

Other stories note Tanaka-sensei’s “traditional” emphasis on men over women: it is common knowledge that women must work harder to earn his approval. His student Tiffany Tamaribuchi, the director of Sacramento Taiko Dan, is a case in point: stories circulate about how hard it was for her, how she stuck it out, and how she earned her place as one of his primary students.

Rev. Tom never studied with Tanaka-sensei but did see him teach. I asked Rev. Tom what he thought Tanaka did that was especially effective for many of his male students, and he answered,

He intimidated them, needled them, and you know, like an army drill sergeant: *What’s the matter with you? You’re so weak!* Just belittling. He did that more to the people who had the most potential. If he didn’t think you were that good, he didn’t spend that much time on you. Japanese American men didn’t last very long in that situation, you know. Caucasian men did, because they thought that’s the way it’s supposed to be. Because many Japanese American men have already been exposed to that kind of thing and they’ve had enough of that. His emphasis was always on basics, would have people work on the same thing over and over and over again.

I think a lot of Tanaka-sensei’s students who have gone on to start their own groups use a lot of the same methods. Not the same methods, but the same structure, organizational structure—the dojo system. There’s a *kohai* and *sempai* [relationships in a hierarchy in which the senior person has both authority and responsibilities]— . . . a lot of emphasis on seniority.

Tanaka-sensei’s gendered authority didn’t transfer easily from a Japanese to a Japanese American teaching environment. Some Japanese Americans had already

experienced such authoritarian models in their own families and were in search of something less hierarchical. On the other hand, the imaginative force of orientalism enabled Tanaka-sensei's teaching method to work *across* race and culture: Rev. Tom thought White American men were more likely to accept the terms of an absolute authority that they perhaps viewed as authentically "Japanese" and therefore beyond discussion, making it even more powerful and attractive for them.

San Francisco Taiko Dojo has both men and women, but starting in the 1990s the odaiko has been played almost entirely by men, especially in the group's signature piece, "Tsunami." Concert footage of this is thrilling: the final section features a series of men, each more muscled than the last, taking turns playing odaiko solos.²⁷ The atmosphere is fierce and aggressive, and the speed, energy, and intensity of the piece escalate as it proceeds. Bender (2012, 172) offers a trenchant analysis of how a few Japanese schools of kumi-daiko (out of many) have promoted a connection between taiko and Japanese nationalism, which some Japanese find uncomfortable. He describes one Japanese taiko player who "expressed concern at how, in her view, taiko performance evoked the militarism of wartime Japan." Let me turn to Bender's account in some detail. In looking closely at how and why Oguchi Daihachi created the Nippon Taiko Foundation (Nippon Taiko Renmei) in 1979, he discovered direct links between Oguchi's taiko activities and right-wing nationalism, not least through the patronage of Sasakawa Ryōichi:

Such large-scale organization requires substantial financial support, which the Nippon Taiko Foundation secured through the Japan Shipbuilding Industry Association (Nippon Senpaku Shinkō-kai), now known as the Nippon Foundation (Nippon Zaidan), an organization that was endowed by the wealthy entrepreneur and philanthropist Sasakawa Ryōichi. Sasakawa, who died in 1995 at the age of ninety-six, was one of the most notorious figures in modern Japanese history. He was an avowed nationalist and a member of Japan's *kuromaku*, a term derived from the theater to refer to the influential figures manipulating Japanese business and politics from behind the scenes. Many Japanese I encountered viewed Sasakawa suspiciously, and his connection to the Nippon Taiko Foundation gave a number of drum groups pause. Concerns about its sources of funding even made some reluctant to join the organization. (180)

Bender reinterviewed Oguchi, who reflected on Sasakawa's politics and his own agreement with them. Oguchi told Bender,

Sasakawa was the kind of person who represented the spirit of old Japan. He believed strongly in respect for one's ancestors and in piety toward the gods of Shinto and Buddhism—the kind of person who represented the spirit of the old-time soldier, one who accepted the Imperial Rescript on Education without question.²⁸ He was the embodiment of *kokusui* [ultranationalism]. Some people call this "ultra right-wing"; if so then I, too, would consider myself to share this sentiment. Sasakawa knew that in every temple and every shrine in Japan, there is a taiko drum, that in this taiko

lives the heart and soul of Japan and the spirits of departed ancestors. By encouraging people to learn about taiko, Sasakawa believed that more individuals would come into contact with and learn about the Japanese spirit. (182)

At the time of Bender's writing, the Nippon Taiko Foundation had over eight hundred taiko groups—many but not all Japanese kumi-daiko groups—but he also reported that certain taiko players openly resisted the kinds of standardization and control that they felt emanated from the foundation. In 2002, Oguchi published a taiko textbook that Bender views as a transparent and troubling attempt to create a national “Japan taiko” that could well flatten out the rich variety of regional taiko styles that have marked kumi-daiko until now.

Through his connection to Oguchi, Tanaka-sensei and his approach to taiko represent a meeting of postwar Japanese identity struggles with economic recovery. When Tanaka-sensei became a key player in Asian American kumi-daiko, the martial arts values of his version of taiko—imbued with gendered nationalist sentiment and shadowed by patriotic fervor—in some cases ran head-to-head against a completely different set of values generated by the politics of the Asian American movement. Asian American taiko players looking for a performative means to oppose histories of racism and containment will likely refute social models reliant on an uncritical acceptance of gendered hierarchy. Tanaka-sensei thus labors under a heavy load. As part of the postwar Japanese push to create what became an economic miracle, he participated fully and deeply in the ideological struggle to think about Japan in new ways and to enact that nation performatively in diaspora. If his participation in an arm of global hypermasculinity smacks uncomfortably of a kind of ultranationalism, it is for real reasons.

My Chinese American cousins were fascinated by Bruce Lee but never pursued the martial arts—let alone taiko—to any extent. Rev. Tom studied the martial arts only briefly but did make a life out of taiko and says that taiko is his Bruce Lee. Tanaka-sensei drew on a version of taiko imbued with patriotism and certain martial arts principles. These three Asian and Asian American male situations are not directly connected, and perhaps my effort to connect them is too speculative and too reliant on intuition. Asian American men growing up in the 1950s through 1970s were looking for new models at a historical moment when there was a shift in the tide: Pacific Rim popular culture channeled certain iconic images and understandings of powerful Asian men into the imaginations of Asian and Asian American men generally.

The construction of a powerful Asian American man of principle and honor has taken place along the sometimes parallel, sometimes intersecting tracks of mediated martial arts and taiko. My point here is to suggest a troubled but often empowering confluence of ideas about Asian masculinity whose transnational circulation has had markedly different effects in different places, times, and men. Certain forms of Japanese nationalism were elided with masculinity during a

period of economic recovery. When those forms were carried into Asian America at a different historical moment, their meaning and power changed. I haven't even told you about my oldest cousin Christopher's fascination with the writer Yukio Mishima in the 1970s—another physically powerful and charismatic Asian masculine icon whose force is troubling for precisely these gendered, racialized, and imperialist reasons. Nostalgia has shaped ideas about Bushido for at least a century, but the oblique movement of Bushido values into North American taiko suggests both a powerful need for performative models and their vulnerability to orientalist reappropriation. Surely it is possible for Asian and Asian American men to participate in the public sphere in ways that are mindful of the play between queerness and militarized threat, and to step forward with unequivocally big . . . drumsticks.

BARING IT ALL FOR TAIKO

As the American studies scholar Masumi Izumi (2001, 44) has written, "In Japan taiko is commonly associated with masculinity. A taiko player's typical image is a muscular man with *hachimaki* (bandanna) and *fundoshi* (loincloth)." When male taiko players perform almost nude, wearing only a minimalist item of "traditional" clothing, they redefine Asian masculinity. Humor, nudity, and spectatorship assert a heterosexist masculinity that is haunted in North America by expectations of Asian effeminacy.

The fundoshi is a (very) small article of Japanese clothing. Worn today at Japanese festivals, it is a self-conscious reference to the past. Indeed, traditional Japanese clothing in a postwar context is deeply mediated and immediately invokes nationalism and Japaneseness without rejecting modernity. The fundoshi is a loincloth worn only by men. It is a long piece of (usually) white cotton about one foot wide and approximately six feet long that is pulled between the buttocks so it cups the genitals like a jockstrap and is then twisted and tied around the waist. The buttocks are bare but the genitals are concealed. Mutsuro Takahashi (1968, 149) writes that the fundoshi is "a cloth possessed of great spiritual powers" and describes how to put it on:

Put a short end of the cloth over one shoulder with a few inches hanging down in back, and let the long end hang down in front. Pass the long end between the thighs, tight against the crotch; hold it firmly in place against the very end of the backbone; and fold it at a right angle. Still holding this fold with one hand, bring the cloth forward around the body so it crosses on top of the short piece, and continue on around to the back. Draw the end under the right-angle fold and pull it in the opposite direction. Now take the short end from the shoulder and let it hang down in front. Pass it between the thighs, thus forming a double-layered pouch, and bring it up in back; pulling the entire arrangement snug, tie the two ends together, after which any surplus can be tucked into the waistband. . . . And the fundoshi is complete.

Some men in Japan wear fundoshi and short, brightly patterned jackets (happi coats) in festivals, especially in massed processions carrying Shinto altars called *mikoshi* through the streets in ritual performances of strength, devotion, and drunkenness. Samurai wore fundoshi under their armor. Until World War II, Japanese men of all classes wore fundoshi as underwear, but the middle and upper classes switched to elasticized Western underwear when American goods and values flooded the country during occupation. In postwar Japan, the fundoshi carries powerful meanings that conflate masculinity, cultural authenticity, and national identity. It is also an object of fascination for non-Japanese: emblematic of an unashamed Japanese physicality untainted by Western Puritanism, and a little ridiculous. Online English-language discussions of fundoshi lead inevitably to jokes about wedgies and more. The fundoshi encapsulates what is most different about Japanese men.

In the Western imagination, the Japanese are famous for their matter-of-fact attitude toward nudity. However, Japanese attitudes toward mixed-gender nudity changed profoundly in the mid-nineteenth century, influenced by Western values. Public baths are still popular but have been gender segregated since 1872. Exposing the body has had strong class connotations: some laborers worked in fundoshi, but samurai didn't appear nude or semiclothed in public. In his introduction to the book *Naked Festival*, Yukio Mishima (1968, 14) proudly addresses the "uniquely Japanese" festival traditions that featured massed men in fundoshi carrying a large shrine through neighborhood streets to the sound of taiko. He wrote rhapsodically about male "sacred nakedness," reflecting on changing Japanese attitudes toward the nude male body in response to Western contact.²⁹ With the full-on romanticism, nationalism, and primitivism for which he was famous, Mishima claimed that the men who donned fundoshi and ran through the streets during the festival returned unapologetically to Japanese values. He declared that they

have cast off the yokes of modern industrial society. Blue-collar workers from huge factories, bank tellers, construction workers—they have bravely cast aside all clothing in favor of the ancient loincloth, they have reclaimed their right to be living males, they have regained joy, fierceness, laughter, and all the primitive attributes of man. If only for a day, thanks to their healthy young bodies, thanks to our primitive past they are once again the essential man.

Nor is it merely strength and life that fills these bodies: even if unconsciously, by means of the festival they have regained the sanctity of their flesh.

Ondekoza (and Kodo) created the odaiko solo that became the model for all other odaiko solos, and it looms large in the taiko imagination. Paul Yoon (2009, 102) writes, "The odaiko solo, as heard and seen in performances by Ondekoza and Kodo, is perhaps the most iconic image of taiko." Bender (2012, 91–93) argues that the odaiko solo and a muscled masculinity are now inseparable. When members of Ondekoza first wore fundoshi in performance, they were making a point

about tradition and class identification, even though many of them were university educated. Bender offers a fascinating explanation of Ondekoza's decision to wear fundoshi while playing "Odaiko," the exemplary solo, and he discusses it in the context of a long progression of performance decisions that ultimately transformed "Odaiko" into the group's most iconic piece. Based on his own ethnographic interviews and other journalistic coverage, Bender relates that Ondekoza members hadn't worn fundoshi in performance until Pierre Cardin saw a photo of them participating in 1975's Naked Festival and requested they wear fundoshi when performing at his theater in Paris. Den Tagayasu wasn't initially open to the idea but eventually gave in, and French audiences (especially gay men) responded with standing ovations. As Bender puts it, the fundoshi "became a kind of stage 'costume' that emphasized the impressive bodies of the male drummers, not just the movements and sounds these bodies produced" (93).

Kodo is also famous for its fundoshi-clad performances, linked to specific repertoire. The group's versions of "Odaiko" and "Yatai Bayashi" are in many ways identical to Ondekoza's (and indeed, many other groups' versions are based on theirs at this point). Yoshikazu Fujimoto's performances of "Odaiko" are legendary. Born in 1950, he is Kodo's most senior performing member, and as the Kodo website states, "In 1972 [he] joined *Sado no Kuni Ondekoza*, and when the group became Kodo in 1981, he was one of the founding members. For many years, he stood center-stage as the group's featured *O-daiko* player and center-man for the *Yatai-bayashi* climax."³⁰ His performance of "Odaiko" filmed in 1992 is stunning in every way.³¹ Fourteen minutes long, it makes the physicality of the performance breathtakingly real and is utterly typical of how Kodo has performed "Odaiko" for at least thirty years, if not longer; its particular drama is in the confluence of the staging (darkened stage with spotlights on the individual performers), the choreography (five performers below, still, looking up at Fujimoto), and the eye of the camera as it roams up and down Fujimoto's body, taking in the curve of every muscle. This version also acts out an explicit hierarchy of male performers: the other men, all younger and more junior within the group's structure, are staged so they focus respectfully on Fujimoto, their eyes on him, their bodies turned toward him, and their stillness designed not to distract. Yoon (2009, 102) writes,

For many, the odaiko solo is the embodiment of power. The size of the drum, the volume, the endurance of the player all manifest this power. Power is etched on to the performer's body as taut musculature and scarcely a trace of fat. In performance, a single stage light shines on a solitary, *fundoshi*-clad drummer kneeling before an enormous drum, which is several feet in diameter. Rising solemnly to his feet, he unhurriedly, but purposefully, raises his *bachi* (stick) and locks one arm straight back. As if pulsing with electricity, his raised right arm twitches slightly before he quickly strikes one single note and lets the vibrations wash over the audience. His measured and deliberate movements punctuate the gravitas of the art form. Gradually he speeds up as he moves into the main section of the piece. Performances, which can

last anywhere from 5 to 25 minutes, typically follow a *jo-ha-kyu* structure, and so speed up significantly toward a finale. For the soloist, the odaiko solo is a marathon, requiring stamina and strength in addition to musicality. Interestingly, in wearing nothing but a *fundoshi*, it is not simply the musical element on display, but also the performer's body. The musicality of the performer, though captivating, is clearly not the *sole* point of interest.

Kodo members also wear *fundoshi* for "Yatai Bayashi," a spectacularly taxing piece originally from the Chichibu festival tradition, played on large *chudaiko* set on the floor: each player sits on the floor facing one drum head, straddling the drum's body and leaning back at a forty-five-degree angle, striking the taiko with special thick *bachi*. As in "Odaiko," the performer's body is exposed to dramatic effect, with every muscle and sinew on display: the musician's core (*hara*) must be in top condition to make it through this grueling piece. I invite the reader to look for online video of Kodo playing "Yatai Bayashi" in *fundoshi*. I have watched the 1995 DVD *Kodo: Live at Acropolis* many times. Its rather brief version of "Odaiko" goes straight into "Yatai Bayashi"—Eiichi Sato finishes his solo, bows briefly to the audience, and then leaps down from the odaiko platform and seats himself at the center *chudaiko*. He and two other men wield the special "Yatai" *bachi*, which look like short baseball bats. As the piece goes on, they grimace and bare their teeth—theatrically?—as they lean back and pound, making the physical effort as visible as possible. They are covered with sweat. Your eyes are irresistibly drawn to their bodies: they have muscles everywhere, in places you didn't even realize the body *had* muscles. You even find yourself looking at how their muscular big toes grip the bodies of the *chudaiko*. They lean back even farther. Can't you feel your own abdominal muscles tighten sympathetically?

Yoon (2009, 100) summarizes the problems facing Asian American men: they are inevitably seen, thanks to popular American caricatures, as effeminate, weak, servile, and deeply unsexy unless proved otherwise. Whether the houseboy or the nerdy model minority, the Asian American man never gets the girl. Yoon argues that searching for "positive performed or mediated Asian male body-types often requires looking (usually literally) to Asia. In stating this I don't mean that negative stereotypes from Asia are absent, only that positive stereotypes typically flow from Asia into the Asian American imagination and not the other way around." Taiko does and doesn't solve this problem. In some ways it offers Asian American men a way to be Asian or Asian American *and* strong and commanding. Yet women dominate North American amateur taiko: at the time of this writing, perhaps 60 percent of all North American taiko players were women, though a majority of taiko teachers are men; until around 2010, 75 percent of North American taiko players were women (Walker 2016). In no way are male taiko players marginalized within the taiko community, but these demographics create yet another way that Asian American men must work harder for visibility. The film scholar Peter Feng

(1996, 27) has argued that American popular culture consistently renders Asian American men invisible, often in inverse proportion to how much it puts forward Asian American women as emblematic of Asian American culture.³² He writes, “American popular culture is notoriously male-centered. For Asian Americans, however, the situation appears to be reversed, which may be yet another reflection of the power of the dominant culture.”

The young Asian American men I know who play taiko in fundoshi rehabilitate Asian American masculinity in ways at once historically informed, deeply playful, and adept at seizing on the changes wrought by the transnational movement of cultural tropes. The playfulness is a defining strategy, an emotional valence, and thoroughly mediated: their mischievousness emerges from the intersection of popular culture and folkloricized practice. The humor on which they rely is related to the powerful Japanese trope of cuteness but is assertively masculine and distinctively ironic in a manner that marks it as irrevocably Asian American rather than Japanese. It offers up a beautiful (heterosexual?) male body for display. This body demands to be spectated in two ways. First, the audience screams and performatively asserts that this body is an object of desire. Second, this body is acknowledged by both the audience and the performers as a joke, or as a playfully ironic and knowing agent that transforms the known trope of the strong, relentless, unbending Japanese man into a platform for a new kind of Asian American masculinity. That is, the trope on which it is based isn’t dismantled, rejected, or discarded: instead, its power is acknowledged, revealed as inappropriate, and then reasserted as the foundation for a masculinity that is all that *and more*. This playfulness offers commentary that simultaneously confronts and backs away from the problem of racialized effeminacy. This is not generic ludic play: in this case, it is an acknowledgement of how the Asian American man is already inarguably gendered, raced, and (de)sexualized. Yet the question remains of whether this is an extension of the Asian or Asian American giggle—the self-deprecating step back from confrontation.³³ Why is playfulness the chosen strategy? Why not anger, ugliness, or a thousand other possibilities? To try to explain all this, I need to draw together the matter of onstage nudity and the Japanese social aesthetic of cuteness.

At the same moment when those Asian and Asian American male bodies are established as objects of desire, their playfulness—signified by those little twitches of the hips, the twinkle rather than the smolder in the eyes—intersects with and signifies on the powerful presence of Japanese popular culture cuteness among Asian American youth. Japanese cute fashion emerged in the 1980s and has both evolved and been exported. As Sharon Kinsella (1995, 243) writes,

Cute fashion was . . . a kind of rebellion or refusal to cooperate with established social values and realities. It was a demure, indolent little rebellion rather than a conscious, aggressive and sexually provocative rebellion of the sort that has been typical of western youth cultures. Rather than acting sexually provocative to emphasise

their maturity and independence, Japanese youth acted pre-sexual and vulnerable in order to emphasize their immaturity and inability to carry out social responsibilities. Either way the result was the same; teachers in the west were as infuriated by cocky pupils acting tough as Japanese teachers were infuriated with uncooperative pupils writing cute and acting infantile.

Childlike cuteness pervades Asian American youth culture, though neither uniformly nor in simple emulation of Japanese youth. It surfaces in particular circumstances, usually as a kind of passive resistance to adult and/or quotidian expectations (e.g., an undergraduate girl will simply giggle rather than answer a professor's question). Ethnic minority groups generally deploy two kinds of humor, "conflict humor," focused on intergroup relations, and "control humor," which ridicules "deviance from the group's norms" (Rinder 1965, 118). The playful, fundoshi-wearing Asian American man activates both at once, performing cuteness and sexiness to the delight and understanding of his peers in the audience: he pokes fun at his own desirability at the very moment when he is literally an object of desire in the spotlight.

Fundoshi cuteness is at once outlandish and self-consciously historicized. Any subject wearing striking clothing from the past makes a statement about their own present. The art historian Anne Hollander (1978) argues that portraiture featuring subjects in historical clothing (e.g., Italian Renaissance painters' depiction of classical Greek dress) is inevitably about the subjects' contemporaneity. Further, in the visual arts, the clothed figure is in dynamic conversation with the nude. Hollander shows how the nude body emerges through artists' understandings of contemporary fashion: clothes literally shape, constrict, weight, pad, and expand ideas about the body. In earlier chapters, I addressed the variety of Japanese and North American taiko costumes, from the prevalent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japanese festival costumes to recent experiments that extend women's bodies in dramatic ways. Exposing the body in taiko performance has a particular history. Women rarely do it, and women revealing bare arms and shoulders is a very recent development, mostly adopted by young players and always as a spectacular display of strength and fitness. When young Asian American men wear fundoshi—that most inarguably Japanese item of clothing—they are stating that they are *not* Japanese.

Asian American masculinity is always in conversation with effeminacy. These young men gender Asian America by engaging implicitly rather than explicitly with long histories of violence and emasculation. They offer a whimsical response that flies in the face of expectation and inverts its "authentic" source. They perform a bodily humor that is decidedly not Japanese yet not wholly Asian American either. It is wrought by the globalized movement of people, musics, and ideas about gender and nation. Displaying themselves in this way for these audiences could happen only in an environment produced through transnational warfare,

empire, and capital. A cheering audience's response creates a new emplacedness, wherein the fundoshi-clad Asian American man is reracialized twice over: his ludic display rejects the militaristic masculinity of the Japanese taiko player while riding on its strength, and it rejects the emasculating gaze of a mainstream non-Asian American audience while insisting that his desirable presence be constituted through spectatorship. It walks a dangerous line, always on the edge of reifying scopophilic practices and infantilizing the very body that is willing to spoof itself. Emotion, gender, race, and place are thus actively constituted through the sounds of these bodies at play and at work.

Transition

From My Journal—Learning and Playing “Miyake,”

May 8, 2006

I’ve been working on “Miyake” for four months now, and I love it. It’s a “traditional” Japanese piece from Miyake Island, but I’m keenly aware that it’s been arranged, rearranged, and folkloricized from top to bottom. Nonetheless, it’s thrilling to work on a piece that’s so iconic for North American taiko players. For this Asian American woman, “Miyake” is so *Japanese*.

It’s the stance, first and foremost—the *kata*. It pushes the body in extreme ways. Look at video 16, Triangle Taiko performing “Miyake,” at <http://wonglouderand-faster.com>. The taiko is placed on a low stand so that you’re striking it at approximately hip level, and you must lower your body accordingly. I love this stance for several reasons. First, look at the beautiful (and perfect) diagonal line outlined by the performer’s left leg and raised right arm. It’s utterly dynamic. Second, look at how the *bachi* are situated: the left *bachi* is wound around the neck so that the arm has an impressive torque when unwound and flung at the drumhead. Look at how the performers hold their right *bachi* at a strong 90 degree angle to the body. This is so different from how we usually hold our *bachi*: normally, the drumstick extends out from the hand and follows the line of the arm, lengthening it in a graceful and dynamic way that channels *ki* in an almost electric manner. In “Miyake,” holding the *bachi* in a 90 degree angle doesn’t stop the movement of *ki*; instead, I think it has the effect of bunching *ki* up in the hand. Holding the *bachi* like this is incredibly strong *looking* and strong *feeling*.

Lowering the hips puts all your weight on your thighs. This is emblematic of a more general taiko principal that isn’t usually realized in such a strenuous manner: the body’s center of gravity is kept very low in taiko, as in many of the Japanese bodily arts (classical dance, or *nihon buyo*; martial arts; etc.). All your *ki* comes up from below—from the earth, from your *hara*. The *hara* is the center of your *ki*. It literally means “belly” or “stomach,” and your energy and vital force are located

here, just below the navel; it is explicitly theorized in dance, the martial arts, and taiko as the locus of, well, everything—your physical comportment and your spiritual and mental energy. Paying attention to your kata inevitably means lowering your hara, and that usually means bending the knees and putting your thighs to work.

The “Miyake” kata is particularly low, challengingly so. As if that weren’t difficult enough, you continually shift your weight back and forth between your left and right legs while playing. Ideally, “Miyake” is performed by two players on one drum, one on either side. They play the same thing but in mirror image, taking turns. I learned “Miyake” from the right side, so I’m accustomed to leading off its central rhythmic motive beginning with my left bachi. The player across from me, though (usually Masaki when I played this with Triangle Taiko) does just the opposite, leading with the right hand, and the “sticking”—that is, which strokes are done by either the right or the left hand—are precisely opposite for each of us.

The central rhythmic motive for “Miyake” goes like this (from my perspective as a player on the right side of the taiko): I start out by springing up from a crouching position (more on that below) and getting into ready position, which means left leg straight and right knee bent so that all my weight is on my right thigh. My feet are flat on the floor, as they should be throughout. They’re both pointed outward at about a 135 angle from the straight line I imagine beneath me. I’m looking at the drumhead. In “Miyake,” your attention really needs to be on the drum, nothing else—no looking out at the audience, no smiling. This is a seriously inward piece. It’s just me and this drumhead. My arms and bachi are as described above: my left arm is wrapped around my neck from in front so that the bottom of my left bachi is next to my right ear, and it’s wrapped so tightly around my neck that I can see the other end of the bachi in the peripheral vision of my left eye. My right arm is fully extended, horizontal to the floor, and its bachi is also horizontal to the floor, held at a right angle to my arm.

The first stroke is from my left hand. Without shifting my weight—without moving anything except that arm—I unwind my left arm and extend it full length so that it connects with the center of the drumhead. If I’ve gotten my spacing right, I am in exactly the right place, exactly one arm’s length away from the drumhead. Of course, it’s necessary to get this exactly right from the get-go—from the moment I spring up from my crouch—because there’s no time or allowance for shifting around and getting repositioned. That would be completely amateurish and out of keeping with the strong, exacting focus of “Miyake.” “Miyake” is about strength, perfection, and focus. I unwind my left arm, let the bachi snap forward carrying the weight of my arm, and *DON*, it connects with the drumhead and bounces back three inches, ending in a 90 angle to my arm, which I hold straight. I stay in this pose for a second. It’s a frozen moment—so much *ki* went into that one stroke. Letting that *ki* resettle in a split second of inaction is essential: it’s a small second of *ma*, that stillness and silence which defines action. Then I lift my left arm

about six inches, from the shoulder, so that it is exactly horizontal to the ground. Locking into this kata is incredibly satisfying: both arms are now fully extended and parallel to the ground, and that gesture of raising the one arm and freezing is powerful. It's like brandishing both bachi—*grrrr!*—but without the loss of control that would result from merely enacting power rather than *being* power.

But this lasts for only a second. In one coordinated movement, I sweep my right arm across my body and strike the drumhead at the same time that I shift my weight to my left knee, pivoting my weight onto my left thigh. And then, in one more series of simultaneous movements, I move back into my original position: my arms swing back to the right and end up as before, right arm fully extended and left arm around my neck. My weight pivots back onto my right leg and my right knee bends deeply as my left leg extends straight. I'm ready to start over.

All that has taken approximately four seconds, and I'm only halfway through the first motive. Now I hit the drum twice—left! right!—in quick succession, and I shift my weight from right to left leg at the same time so that it fully arrives on my left leg when I strike with my right hand. This is very satisfying because that second strike—*DON!* (right)—has the full weight of my body behind it. If I do this move correctly, it feels fantastic: the literal weight of my body is flung through my right arm and out my hand, and it barrels along the full length of my bachi and out its end, *DON!* It's what things should feel like all the time if your kata were always perfect.

But this movement isn't finished until I pivot out of it and back into ready position, back where I started . . . and that must happen very quickly. I will need to execute this complete set of moves all over again in one second. It took a lot of ki to do just this much, and now I need to do it again. I fling myself away from the drum. I arrive back in ready position, and this time I've pushed my hara even lower and my right knee bends even more deeply and my god it hurts, but I'm determined to get *into* and then *hold* this kata for a priceless, perfect second. I'm still staring intently, only, at the drumhead, but if I've done it right, I can feel the audience respond even without looking at them. Ki rolls off them and over me—I feel it. Their ki is saying, *This is strong, this is dramatic.* I'm already breathing hard, but their ki floods into me and I'm reenergized, I'm ready to do it again, and again.