

Introduction

Taiko is an invented tradition that has traveled far beyond its originating communities. Many kinds of people play it, mostly as a First World amateur recreation activity. For some Asian Americans, however, taiko is an important alternative academy, a repository of collective memory, and a third space—a public sphere where potential forms of social justice are acted out in plain sight.¹

As I write this in 2015, it is the day of the annual Obon at Senshin Buddhist Temple. Obon is a yearly Japanese / Japanese American Buddhist gathering to commemorate the ancestors. Six years have passed since I stopped playing taiko seriously, but I still await the summer Obon season with joy, and the gathering at Senshin is probably my favorite—if it is possible to choose among so many, each with a unique character. Going to Obon at Senshin feels to me like returning to the root of North American taiko. The constellation of performance practices—dance, taiko, gathering together—are all explicitly articulated as Buddhist through Rev. Masao (Mas) Kodani's teachings, and this temple is home to one of the first taiko groups in the US, Kinnara Taiko. I can't wait to dance, to light a lamp in the courtyard, to enter the temple and burn incense, and to see the many taiko friends who will surely be there.²

I love how Japanese American Obon gatherings emphasize profound togetherness and a negation of self. As Rev. Mas has said, when you dance *bon-odori*—the unison circle dances that are central to Obon—“you're fully involved in what you are doing but . . . you're not watching yourself do it.”³ I wrote this book in that spirit, though of course you can't write without watching yourself do it. Nonetheless, my intent is to carry my community consciousness learned through taiko and *bon-odori* into this writing, with humility. I deliberately move in and out of theoretical language in this book because I need critical concepts and vocabulary to talk about the issues closest to my concerns. I write decidedly in the first person not only because taiko has been an intensely personal experience for me but also because I aim to write about it in the grounded way it demands. While one could say this about any music anywhere, taiko is so explicitly about the body and bodily experience that I have known from the first that this was the way I wanted to write about it.

This book is about the pleasures of playing taiko, but it is also about Asian American anger. Playing taiko has been one of the most joyful and fulfilling

experiences I've ever had, but it is also interlaced with anger—and more than one kind of anger at that. My most driving question is how and why taiko is a key means for Asian American communities to articulate, declare, and affirm self-determination. Oliver Wang (2015) has wistfully written, “I find myself wanting to know more about the making of ‘Asian-American-ness,’ i.e. the internal, intra-community ways we’ve defined out place, our worth, our identities and cultures.” Other Asian Americans stood with Japanese Americans in their fight for reparations for the mass incarceration during World War II: taiko was a key means to formulate intra-Asian American alliances and solidarity.⁴ This book is fundamentally informed by my belief that that moment has not passed and that the Asian American Movement is still alive and needed.

Although I do not address Japanese taiko to any great extent in this book, I am provoked in all the right ways by Yoshitaka Terada’s (2011a) work on how diasporic Okinawans and Buraku (low-caste “untouchables”) have, like Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans, turned to taiko in search of self-determination; they seek a way to speak differently despite the relentless power of the nationalist “Japanese gaze” (247). Similarly, the taiko scenes I know best are acted out under not one but two imperial gazes, those of the US and Japan, yet North American taiko emerged from encounters *between* communities: Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans (hereafter Japanese/Asian Americans), Japanese Americans and African Americans, Japanese/Asian Americans and Latin@s, and—inevitably—Asian Americans and White Americans. Some of these encounters took/take place in the checkered interethnic communities of greater Los Angeles; others were/are *encuentro*, that is, planned, intentional convenings meant to bring new communities into existence.⁵

Some of this book is written “as if it were a memory,” in the words of the poet Garrett Hongo (2007). I will come back to that feeling and to Hongo’s words in chapter 3, on the summertime Obon dances. While my research methodology has been profoundly ethnographic, my work on Asian American expressive culture has taught me that what we know about ourselves, what we think we know about ourselves, and what we have been told about ourselves are interconstitutive. Cultural and political self-determination does not stand outside the “deathly embrace” of orientalism (Ma 2000) but is in sustained, irrevocable, and creative conversation with it. Taiko is fatally part of that dialogue. Taiko is beautiful, flawed, powerful, and imperfect. It offers a set of potentialities and political promises and it is easily overrun, depending on whether you regard it as a room into which you are invited⁶ or as an open field of opportunity.

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It’s 2005. We just played for a wedding at Yamashiro, the landmark restaurant high on a hill in Hollywood, built in 1911–14 to resemble a Japanese palace. It serves “CalAsian” cuisine and is exquisitely, over-the-top exotic, with dark green tile

floors and heavy wooden doors. A koi pond and a jewel-like garden with bonsai and miniature maples glow in the inner courtyard, open to the sky. Any number of Hollywood films and television series have been shot here, including scenes in *Sayonara* (1957) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). Tables line two of the courtyard's walls, and in front of the third is a small area under an overhang that serves as a stage. We have played in this courtyard many times. Today it holds us—a few members of the Satori Daiko group—a string trio, and a wedding party. The bride is Japanese American and the groom is Jewish, both in their forties. Part of the bride's family is South Asian, so the restaurant is full of happy, multiethnic, beautifully dressed people, including small children of all stripes, who poke around the garden and get wet when the sprinklers suddenly come on. I am unexpectedly and deeply moved when the huppah—the Jewish wedding canopy—is carried out by four friends, men and women, who hold it up through the entire ceremony. The rabbi sings the Song of Songs; the bride's parents escort her to the huppah; the groom can't stop smiling. We play them all in. The string trio plays Pachelbel. The bride's South Asian relatives come up and sing a Karnatak wedding song—I hear the name Sita in the lyrics, bride of brides. The rabbi places a wine glass under the groom's foot, he stomps on it, I shout *Mazel tov!* with everyone else, and we immediately start playing “Oni” (Demon) as the wedding party begins their exit procession, crossing in front of us only inches from my *chudaiko*. Several of them look at us, catch our eyes, and smile. I think, This is why I play taiko, and this is why I love playing taiko in California. This is how it works, in a restaurant built to provide orientalist splendor for Hollywood stars, now a backdrop for this wedding of genuine feeling between two communities—Jewish Americans and Japanese Americans—that struggle with out-marriage (Shinagawa and Pang 1996), for these people who have created new ways to draw together the dissimilar elements of their lives and their families.

Whenever we perform, audience members come up afterward, and someone inevitably says, “You must get rid of a lot of stress by hitting those drums!” Yes, we say agreeably, *yes, we do*. Among ourselves, however, we rarely talk about taiko as a stress reliever: we are much more likely to touch on the joy of performance and the things that went hilariously wrong. We don't discuss anger. I sought out taiko with a deep desire to put my joy and my rage together. As I have written elsewhere (Wong 2008), I saw San Jose Taiko perform in the 1990s and was instantly consumed by the desire to be Asian American in the strong, graceful, loud, joyful ways that they exemplify.

Much of this book reflects on my experiences as a member of an ensemble called Satori Daiko. I began studying taiko in 1997 with Rev. Shuichi Thomas Kurai, a Japanese American Zen Buddhist priest and taiko teacher (see fig. 1, Rev. Tom Kurai, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). Since then I have spent time with taiko ensembles in Chicago, North Carolina, and Southern California. Rev. Tom—as

he was known to his students, and as I refer to him throughout this book—was the founder and director of the Taiko Center of Los Angeles. The TCLA was the sum of Rev. Tom's many activities, including his taiko classes in several locations and a constant stream of performances. In 1999 Rev. Tom created a performing group drawn from students in his various classes, which he named Satori Daiko, or "Enlightenment Taiko." Satori is the flash of understanding posited in Zen Buddhism as an ephemeral moment of comprehension. It is attainable through meditation (*zazen*), and Zen Buddhist teachings suggest that training and practice can result in *satori*, though the discipline required is substantial. The name Satori Daiko thus signals a Zen Buddhist orientation.

At that time, Southern California had about twenty taiko groups, so Satori Daiko became part of a dynamic local community of taiko practitioners. I was a founding member and was immersed in the group until 2009: I attended weekly rehearsals and performed constantly, sometimes several times a week. I wish I had kept a diary of all our performances; my conservative estimate is that I performed more than two hundred times in those ten years. Some performances were full-length proscenium stage events (e.g., at Pomona College and in the Aratani Theatre in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles), but most were shorter, usually with only several Satori members, at cultural festivals, private events such as weddings and parties, school assemblies, Asian supermarket openings, and the like. I went to Japan four times on study tours led by Rev. Tom for the members of Satori and the TCLA, each time in August during Obon season (in 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2006). On each trip, Rev. Tom led us through two intense weeks of taiko-related experiences. We participated in Obon in Tsubetsu, Hokkaido; attended the Earth Celebration organized by Kodo on Sado Island; had workshops with renowned taiko teachers, including Kiyonari Tosha (one of the founders of Sukeroku Daiko); met Rev. Tom's *minyo* (folk music) teacher Sudo-sensei in Morioka, Iwate Prefecture, and participated in a Kurokawa Sansa Odori rehearsal with her; attended many *matsuri* (festivals); performed at a theme park (Shima Spain Village Parque España) in Mie Prefecture; toured the Asano taiko factory and showroom in Hakusan, Ishikawa Prefecture; visited the famous Buraku neighborhood and TaikoMasa factory in Naniwa Ward, Osaka, and saw the Buraku ensemble Ikari Taiko perform in their annual *matsuri*; and shopped in the Miyamoto taiko showroom in Asakusa, Tokyo, every time. In sum, I had extraordinary experiences thanks to Rev. Tom.

WHAT TAIKO IS AND WHAT IT COULD BECOME

Taiko is a decidedly contemporary form of ensemble drumming that is built on the bones of Japanese festival drumming. This "new tradition" is called *kumi-daiko*, "group taiko," because taiko ensembles usually feature numerous drums of at least three different sizes, often played in a fast, loud, virtuosic, athletic style that is quite

unlike the dignified, minimalist solo drumming that continues to accompany Shinto and Buddhist ritual. In some ways taiko is very old, but in most of the ways that matter, it is a transnational, globalized, dynamic tradition that changes by the day. In Japan it is part of nationalist folklore movements. In the Americas it is a means by which communities of Japanese descent explore heritage and assert new diasporic sensibilities. More broadly, taiko has attracted multiethnic interest but is strongly and self-consciously Asian American . . . for now, though I suspect that moment is passing even as I write. It exemplifies the performative: it is a loud, physical platform for the emergence of newly racialized and gendered identities in the environment of post-1960s US and Canadian multicultural politics. Taiko does things for the people involved in its praxis—complicated identity work is always part of any performance activity, anywhere. This is the performative function of performance: performance changes accepted social realities and can either maintain or transform how people think about themselves and their relationships to others. Twenty-first-century kumi-daiko is particularly embroiled in performative identity work, regardless of location. The North American anthropologists Millie Creighton (2004, 2008) and Shawn Bender (2005) have considered its role in postwar Japanese definitions of “tradition” and *furusato* (home village, rural roots). Yoshitaka Terada (2001, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b) has done long-term research on taiko in three minority communities: Okinawans and Buraku in Osaka, and Asian Americans in North America. The US ethnomusicologist Mark Tusler (2003) has charted the history of three formative Japanese American taiko groups in California. Kumi-daiko emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a “new” tradition in a way that outlined a peculiarly (un)acknowledged discursive relationship between old and new, “tradition” and the innovative (Fujie 2001). Ideas about race, ethnicity, and gender are played out through taiko in a transpacific flow of performative exchange.

I used the word *tradition* repeatedly in the last paragraph, fully aware that this term, like *authenticity*, can only ever have quotation marks around it, thanks to almost fifty years of poststructural scholarship focused on culture in motion through representational play (Bendix 1997). I don’t regard kumi-daiko as traditional, though some of its practitioners very much want it to be, and some of its elements are rooted in identifiable heritage practices; in my view, kumi-daiko combines, moves between, and exceeds the traditional and the popular. It reveals how First World locations allow kumi-daiko practitioners to play with and across those ideologies. As Tim Taylor (2016, 90) writes, in First World “neoliberal capitalist culture, authenticity has become a kind of floating ideology that is used to animate a variety of other ideologies/discourses.” Kumi-daiko is constituted through a far-flung community of practice, and that, for me, is the point, and why I think it appropriate to refer to it as a tradition (which is not so traditional). Despite the range of styles and the dynamism of contemporary experimentation in

taiko, its practitioners often share practices, ideas, and values. What's more, those shared things are often quite important to its practitioners. I thus argue that taiko, or twenty-first-century kumi-daiko, is a tradition, though one that constantly changes. My decision to use the term is no retrograde return to hardened categories of music but rather an acknowledgment that these thousands of practitioners mostly see themselves as connected. They believe themselves—mostly—to be a community of practice, though across vast geocultural spaces.

Taiko is now a hugely popular music that has mushroomed into a world phenomenon. In 2000, there were perhaps 150 taiko groups in North America; by 2005, there were perhaps 200; at the time of this writing, there are approximately 300.⁷ By way of contrast, Chie Otsuka (1997, 17) estimated that Japan had perhaps 5,000 taiko groups in 1997. Japan has more kumi-daiko groups than North America, Latin America, Europe, and Australia combined, but interest in taiko outside Japan is clearly on the upswing.

An accurate count of taiko groups doesn't exist, though more information is available with each passing year. All attempts to create taiko databases have relied on self-registration, leading to incomplete data. Three well-known websites for taiko enthusiasts offer fascinating (though conflicting) information. The Rolling Thunder website, active from 1996 to 2010 (and no longer available), was long authoritative and included the first attempt at a directory of taiko groups worldwide. In August 2014, the Discover Nikkei site listed 151 groups in the US, 22 in Canada, 11 in Germany, 10 in England, 4 in Belgium, 3 in Brazil, 2 in Australia, 2 in New Zealand, 1 in Argentina, 1 in the Netherlands, and 1 in Peru, for a total of 208.⁸ At that time, TaikoSource (<https://taikosource.com/>) listed 61 groups in the US, 26 in Germany, 22 in England, 20 in Japan, 16 in Canada, 7 in Switzerland, 4 in Australia, 4 in Belgium, 4 in Brazil, 4 in France, 4 in New Zealand, 2 in Hungary, 2 in Italy, 2 in Scotland, 1 in Argentina, 1 in Hong Kong, 1 in Ireland, 1 in Singapore, 1 in South Africa, 1 in Spain, 1 in Sweden, and 1 in Ukraine. In February 2019, TaikoSource listed 487 taiko groups worldwide (including only 20 in Japan, which is obviously much too low and the result of self-reporting). In 2013 and 2016 the Taiko Community Alliance conducted an online census for groups outside Japan, and the 2016 results showed that the US—and California in particular—contains the most taiko groups (of those that participated), that the UK dominates the scene beyond North America, that two-thirds of taiko players are women, and that the “Asian American” versus “White” participant ratio is about 4:3.⁹ The rapidly rising number of White/Anglo taiko players in North America and Europe is part of the scene's explosive expansion.

The US west coast has a critical mass of taiko groups, and Southern California has a particularly large number. Taiko groups in Southern California receive constant invitations to play in public. City fairs and festivals require a steady stream of colorful ethnic music and dance. Corporations often contract taiko groups to

play for parties and receptions. The vibrant Asian communities of Southern California—of which there are many, from East to Southeast to South Asian—not only support their own unique traditions but often emphasize intra-Asian connections, so it isn't unusual during the Lunar New Year season, for example, for taiko performers to run from one celebration to another, some hosted by the Vietnamese communities in Orange County and others organized by the huge, diverse Chinese communities of the San Gabriel Valley. We are accustomed to sharing green rooms with everyone from community-based martial arts schools to Korean *p'ungmul* musicians to Hawaiian hula groups.

The memory and trauma of the Japanese American incarceration camps is quite real and immediate. The last generation of internees is passing, but the annual community pilgrimages to the incarceration camp sites of Manzanar and Tule Lake continue, and taiko plays an essential role in them. One of the most important driving impulses for the earliest taiko groups in the 1970s was the anger that the Sansei (third-generation Japanese Americans) felt toward the incarceration. Many California taiko groups are based in Japanese Buddhist temples and are explicitly conceived as part of Buddhist practice, inextricably bound up with the deepest community-based practices. The annual explosion of summer Obon festivals at Japanese American Buddhist temples is vivid evidence that some of the oldest ritual contexts for taiko are alive and well . . . and changing in all the ways that point to cultural vitality: there is new as well old repertoire, accepted as well as emergent lines of teaching and transmission, and so on.

In sum, taiko is a casebook example of a heritage music that is anything but endangered. Its Japanese American community base is both deep and broad; a young generation of Japanese American practitioners and teachers is much in evidence; informed pan-Asian American participation is widespread. This is the stuff of which folklorists dream: a traditional practice that has been sustained by its own communities for real reasons, shepherded by any number of thoughtful teachers. Taiko is owned by its communities in all the ways that point to cultural sustainability (Schippers and Grant 2016). It has strong and explicit systems for teaching and learning; its musicians have a diverse range of positions within the far-flung community; and its practitioners have shared core values as well as flexible approaches to recontextualization and cross-cultural influences.

(PRE)HISTORIES

Taiko is a postwar tradition of Japanese drumming that is also Japanese American and Asian American. It is loud, physical, and powerfully expressive. It is a deeply mediated world music; it is both very old and quite contemporary; it is a fusion of different musical influences; it is folkloricized; and it is a global phenomenon, with approximately three hundred groups in North America and perhaps five thousand

in Japan. I played taiko for twelve years and have spent more than a decade writing about it (Wong 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008). This book mostly addresses taiko in Southern California, particularly in greater Los Angeles. It focuses on how and why Asian Americans drum in environments defined by pervasive, banal multiculturalism and still somehow, sometimes, manage to open principled spaces of Japanese/Asian American self-awareness. This sonic and corporeal social justice work may or may not be intentional or explicit. The words available to describe this work are many, each powerful in different ways. Such critical work done by academics and activists has been characterized as antisubordination, antisubjugation, anticaste, antiracist. From a legal perspective, the point is equal citizenship. Critical race theory first emerged from civil rights legal scholarship for good reason. As Balkin and Siegel (2003, 1) write, “Antisubordination theorists contend that guarantees of equal citizenship cannot be realized under conditions of pervasive social stratification and argue that law should reform institutions and practices that enforce the secondary social status of historically oppressed groups.” Several of the first Japanese American taiko groups (especially Kinnara and San Jose Taiko) were driven by postincarceration sensibilities and were directed toward exactly such questions. As Joe Schloss puts it, ethnomusicologists study “the way people use art—especially music—to develop new perspectives on social, cultural and political issues.”¹⁰

Here is one brief example of how the sound of taiko is part of broader cultural and political social aesthetics. Taiko players use the onomatopoeic syllable *don* to indicate the strike of a drumstick (*bachi*) on a drumhead, especially and specifically a deep, loud strike (the syllable *ten* is used for an identical strike on a smaller, higher-pitched drum like the *shime*). *Don* is not confined to drums or music, however. It is part of the compound word *pikadon*, inextricably related to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: *pika* means “a brilliant flash of light,” and *don* is “a thunderous clap or boom.” Those closest to the point of detonation experienced only *pika* and were no longer present to hear or feel the *don*. *Pika* preceded *don* on those days in 1945. Put together, these words onomatopoeically enact the need for new vocabulary to address the magnitude of the bombs’ impact on Japanese society. Nobuko Miyamoto starts her 2015 song “Sem-bazuru,” commemorating the seventieth anniversary of those atomic bombs, with a chorus of children repeating the phrase “PIKA-don, PIKA-don, PIKA-don-don.”¹¹ Taiko doesn’t refer to the bombs, nor did the bombs refer to taiko: rather, the noise of taiko is part of a broader sphere of powerful sound that is felt and heard. The syllable *don* indicates a place beyond translation but within sensate experience and knowledge.¹²

Taiko has centuries-old roots in Japanese Buddhism, as ritual practice and as festival music; in the 1950s and 1960s, young Japanese from the postwar generation reworked it into a folkloricized tradition featuring large ensembles of massed

drums.¹³ Simultaneously, these musicians infused the performance practice with the principles and choreographies of martial arts and transformed taiko—by then called kumi-daiko—into a presentational music for the proscenium stage. Kumi-daiko was brought to the United States in 1968 by Seiichi Tanaka, who founded San Francisco Taiko Dojo; his extended circle of students continues to form the pedagogical core of the North American taiko scene. Although bon-odori and certain kinds of matsuri drumming were already part of the Japanese American immigrant community, kumi-daiko appealed to Sansei in particular: its strength and presence spoke assertively against regimes of racist representation that young Asian Americans were then just beginning to address. At the time of this writing, North American taiko groups are mostly amateur, and they address the range of possible identifications (Buddhist, Japanese American, Asian American, non-Asian, non-Japanese, etc.) in different ways. In sum, the postwar Japanese tradition of taiko drumming was transported to North America fifty years ago and has become an important stage for Asian American identity work. The transpacific movement of taiko and taiko performers between Here and There remains central to its development and its problematics.

Most North American participants in this tradition use the term *taiko* in everyday conversation, though they are aware that the more proper term is *kumi-daiko*, for “group of drums.” Kumi-daiko was specifically invented by Daihachi Oguchi in 1951, as explored in depth by Shawn Bender (2012, 48–52, 174–76). Some argue that the most accurate term is *wadaiko* (e.g., Pachter 2013), but the North American practitioners I know seldom use it. The uses and histories of these interrelated terms reflect the dynamism of the performance practices based on such drums. The drums themselves are unquestionably very old in Japan and directly linked to Buddhist and Shinto ritual practice, including sutra chanting and marking the ritual times of day (Malm 2000, 56–58, 72; De Ferranti 2000, 40–47). Percussion is intrinsic to matsuri traditions but, although regarded as traditional, has changed in response to local and national needs (Schnell 1999). For English-speaking North Americans, *taiko* is a Japanese word whose meaning is now widely known, along with *sushi*, *karate*, *teriyaki*, and *geisha*—all now phantasmatically familiar through uneven historical processes of exoticization and appropriation.

Only three English-language books have been published on taiko.¹⁴ Heidi Varian’s *The Way of Taiko* (2013) is an excellent introduction and is imbued with Tanaka-sensei’s teachings. Shawn Bender’s extraordinary monograph *Taiko Boom* (2012) is to date the most comprehensive English-language ethnographic study of taiko in Japan. Angela Ahlgren’s *Drumming Asian America* (2018) is very close to my own questions and commitments, and I have learned much from our conversations over the years. A number of English-language dissertations and MA theses have addressed kumi-daiko in the US, Canada, and Latin America.¹⁵ My work is indebted to Varian’s and Bender’s publications, but my thinking (and Ahlgren’s) is

located in twenty-first-century Asian American studies, and I emphasize intra-Asian and Asian American culture flows. As Kandice Chuh (2002, 292) argues, the Asian American transnation is “both *of* and *not of*” America, and it tells a story about Asian American “*difference* and *mutability* rather than *identity* and *fixity*,” though audiences *and* taiko players often prefer the latter and deny the former. Japanese ≠ Japanese American ≠ Asian American, yet the points of contact, both real and imagined, are significant for both audiences and taiko players. Happily, I have learned much from the lively circle of other scholars who also do research on taiko, including Ahlgren, Susan Asai, Lei Ouyang Bryant, Linda Fujie, Masumi Izumi, Henry Johnson, Wynn Kiyama, Kim Noriko Kobayashi, Jennifer Milioto Matsue, Pachter, Kimberly Powell, Yoshitaka Terada, Tusler, Minako Waseda, and Paul Yoon. Virtually nothing I write about here is new or terra incognita, though I hope my critical lens is useful. The spectacular performativity of taiko has drawn all of us to some of the same materials, and we tend to share our excitement about the praxis *and* the cultural work of taiko. But each of us offers a different line in and a different way of configuring the relationships. Hopefully, the fellowship of taiko scholars has made this book better than it might have been.

Taiko effectively addresses Asian American needs for empowerment precisely because it is commoditized, mediated, and easily appropriated. Originally rooted in postwar Japanese American heritage politics, US taiko carries fewer and fewer specific meanings as more and more amateur players are neither Japanese American nor Asian American. Taiko teeters permanently on the edge of orientalist reabsorption (Taylor 2007, 140–60): no Southern California multicultural festival is complete without a taiko performance. Its slipperiness as a sign of authenticity is both its power and a vulnerability.

Each chapter in this book focuses on specific moments and practices. Chapters 1 and 2 reflect on a particular piece and some of the material objects that taiko players carry around and wear. Chapter 3 takes place within the huge circle dances through which Japanese Americans maintain cultural memory. Chapters 4 and 5 allow anger to surface. The latter addresses how some Asian American men draw on Japanese cinematic narratives and displays of physical prowess, exposing the Asian body to create old-but-new re-masculations. In chapter 6, I look at taiko players’ valorization of pain (the pride taken in sore muscles and blisters) and the injury-without-end of the Japanese American incarceration. Chapter 7 addresses how taiko is reorientalized through commoditized celebrations of J-cool in a circuit of Pacific Rim goods and ideas—I take an irritated look at taiko as the new global groovy in my analysis of a car commercial. Throughout, I deploy postcolonial feminist approaches to consider how minoritarian anger refigures the body, whether through female taiko players’ redefinition of “traditional” costumes or through new erotics of pleasure and participation. Intermittently, I reflect on the power and limitations of autoethnography. I attend closely to what

taiko players say and do. I dwell anxiously on the hackneyed ethnic even as I look for signs that Asian American visibility matters.

Depending on how you count it, I am from the third generation of North American taiko players. I begin with the way the story is usually told. A Japanese martial artist named Seichi Tanaka emigrated to the US in 1967, opened a dojo in San Francisco in 1968, and started teaching the contemporary tradition of Japanese drumming known as kumi-daiko or taiko. Many others have related the details (Varian 2013; Tusler 2003). Tanaka-sensei is one of the founding figures of North America kumi-daiko, and San Francisco Taiko Dojo remains a legendary organization. Tanaka-sensei instituted in the US a still-new “tradition” of drumming that emerged in Japan following World War II: in 1947, a young Japanese jazz drummer named Oguchi Daihachi returned home from the war and tried to play a piece on taiko at the local Shinto shrine based on embellished traditional matsuri patterns; in 1951 he founded Osuwa Daiko, widely regarded as the first kumi-daiko group. From the beginning, the music and the instruments reflected a combination of reconstituted traditionality and jazz sensibilities, the latter including solos and improvisation. In 1959, three Japanese musicians formed a Tokyo-festival-style (*Edo-bayashi*) kumi-daiko group and named it Yushima Tenjin Sukeroku Daiko, which eventually morphed into Oedo Sukeroku Daiko. Sukeroku performed in California in 1969, and Tanaka-sensei formed a close working relationship with its members that fundamentally informed his own style of playing and teaching. That same year, Tagayasu Den, a young Japanese “Marxist-Maoist agitator” (Bender 2012, 64), political organizer, and folklorist, founded the kumi-daiko ensemble Za Ondekoza on Japan’s Sado Island with a group of idealistic young students who were disturbed by the postwar disappearance of Japanese traditional culture. Den developed a model for kumi-daiko as a way of life revolving around rigorous athleticism, communal living, self-sufficiency, and drum practice. His principle of *Sogakuron*—that “running and drumming are one, and a reflection of the drama and energy of life”¹⁶—is still the core of Ondekoza’s philosophy and practice. In 1981, most of the founding members parted ways with Den (who maintained Ondekoza by recruiting new members) and founded Kodo, arguably still the most famous taiko group in the world, thanks to a relentless touring schedule.

Meanwhile, the Sansei activists Rev. Masao (Mas) Kodani and George Abe founded Kinnara Taiko at Senshin Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles in 1969. They were aware of Tanaka-sensei’s activities four hundred miles away in San Francisco Taiko Dojo, but they were driven by Sansei rather than Japanese sensibilities and pursued an egalitarian Buddhist aesthetic that emphasized group improvisation. Rev. Tom Kurai and Kenny Endo were members of Kinnara for a short time. In 1973, PJ Hirabayshi and Roy Hirabayshi, a young Sansei couple, parted ways with San Francisco Taiko Dojo and founded San Jose Taiko to serve their local Japanese American community. Denver Taiko was founded by Japanese American activists

in 1975, and its members sought training from San Jose Taiko, Tanaka-sensei, and Kinnara Taiko. The Japanese kumi-daiko master Etsuo Hongo founded L.A. Matsuri Taiko in 1977. Soh Daiko was founded in New York City by Alan and Merle Okada in 1979. At least three Japanese American Buddhist ministers played an important role in the formation of these early taiko groups: Rev. Hiroshi Abiko was a founding member of San Jose Taiko and later helped establish a group called Dharma Taiko at the Palo Alto Buddhist Temple; in New York City, the New York Buddhist Church chair Mamoru “Mo” Funai helped found Soh Daiko with the Okadas; and Kinnara Taiko remains fundamentally associated with Senshin Buddhist Temple and Rev. Mas.¹⁷

After Ondekoza performed in Seattle in 1980, local Japanese American and Chinese American activists started a taiko group there. More of Tanaka-sensei’s students also formed their own groups, including Shasta Taiko in Northern California (founded by Jeanne Mercer and Russel Baba in 1985) and Sacramento Taiko Dan (founded by Tiffany Tamaribuchi in 1989). All these groups are still active and influential. In the 1990s the kumi-daiko scene grew considerably. Kyodo Taiko was established at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1990, followed by Stanford Taiko and Jodaiko in 1992 (at Stanford University and the University of California, Irvine, respectively), thus kick-starting what is now known as the collegiate taiko scene. Although many of the early university-based groups had ties to Japanese American student clubs and Buddhist temples, they quickly became a magnet for other Asian American students. Portland Taiko was founded in 1994 by several former members of Stanford Taiko. The North American Taiko Conference (NATC) was first held in Los Angeles in 1997 and then every two years until 2011; after a pause, the Taiko Community Alliance has hosted it biannually since 2015. In 2005, there were perhaps 200 taiko groups in North America, with much smaller numbers in Western Europe and Australia; in 2016, the Taiko Census conducted by the Taiko Community Alliance documented 856 taiko groups, including 89 in Japan.

In short, taiko was picked up by many Japanese/Asian Americans in the 1970s and 1980s, especially on the West Coast, and subsequently became hugely popular in North America. North American taiko groups include college clubs, community groups sometimes based in Japanese Buddhist temples, all-woman groups, groups that emulate “Japanese” behaviors, groups that reject hierarchy, groups with entirely Japanese American members, groups with no Japanese Americans or Asian Americans at all, and more.

During the 2000s the North American taiko scene grew exponentially. More community-based groups were formed. More and more collegiate groups were founded. The first US-based professional taiko ensembles appeared in close order: TAIKOPROJECT was founded in 2000 and On Ensemble in 2002, both led by men then in their late twenties who had been very active in the collegiate taiko

scene and wanted to keep going. These two ensembles were deliberately small and exclusive, unlike most community groups: one of their main purposes was to allow a select group of professional-level taiko players to perform mostly original work. Both quickly developed an intensive schedule of professional stage performance tours; their leaders almost instantly became coveted workshop teachers. Also in 2002, KODO Arts Sphere America (KASA) was created by Kodo's founding managing director. The organization describes itself as a nonprofit "grass-roots organization whose board members are also members of the North American taiko community" and whose "mission is to facilitate communication among community taiko groups, both in Japan and North America."¹⁸ KASA's program director, Donna Ebata, has been a member of Kinnara Taiko since the early 1980s and is thus from the first generation of Japanese American taiko players.

Beginning around 2010, new groups appeared more and more rapidly. Links between the Japanese and North American taiko spheres intensified and the kumi-daiko scene's deep primary location in Japanese/Asian American communities gave way to increasing numbers of groups focused on taiko as a practice rather than an extension of Japanese American communities. In 2011 the first annual East Coast Taiko Conference (ECTC), modeled on the NATC, was hosted by the collegiate group Yamatai at Cornell University, and it is now a well-established event, usually held on college campuses.¹⁹ Asano Taiko U.S. opened in greater Los Angeles (Torrance) in August 2013. It houses the Los Angeles Taiko Institute (LATI), which offers classes taught primarily by two leading middle-generation American taiko players, Kris Bergstrom and Yuta Kato, and by a rich mix of visiting Japanese musicians, as well as practice sessions between classes, led by "coaches," or advanced performers.

Asano Taiko U.S. may be a game changer. The US outpost of one of the two major taiko companies in Japan, it instantly commanded attention with its showroom full of gorgeous taiko and two soundproof studios for classes. Behind the showroom is Kato Taiko, where the taiko maker Toshio Kato (Yuta Kato's father) repairs taiko and takes special orders. In 2014 Asano formed UnitOne, a professional taiko ensemble featuring top performers mostly in their thirties and early forties. When I attended the Twenty-Third Annual Taiko Gathering in August 2016—an event always held on the last day of Nisei Week in the JACCC Plaza in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo, with invited taiko groups performing thirty-minute sets—Asano Taiko came on near the end, featuring almost fifty performers from LATI's classes and workshops, and they performed a breathtaking set on their gorgeous drums. Asano Taiko U.S. may represent a certain formalization of instruction with its for-profit structure, as well as a consolidation of Japanese craftsmanship. Its massive, beautiful drums make other groups' small, lopsided, and often battered wine barrels look hopelessly amateurish, helping to nudge aside the DIY ethics and aesthetics that have guided North American taiko until now.

In the same year that Asano Taiko U.S. opened, the NATC faced a crisis. It had continued to grow and acquired a life of its own, with every other iteration hosted outside Los Angeles, including in Seattle and Sacramento. But just at the point when taiko players had come to rely on this biannual conference for authoritative instruction, its support structure was imperiled. The conference was one of many activities hosted and organized by the Japanese American Culture and Community Center in Los Angeles. For reasons too complicated to address here, the JACCC was no longer able to host the NATC after 2011. North American taiko players wanted and expected a conference in 2013, but the nonprofit structures established by the JACCC were essential to the conference's finances. In 2013 the NATC's Advisory Council created the Taiko Community Alliance and organized a three-day retreat to establish its mission and operations. The TCA hosted its first NATC in 2015, in Las Vegas.

Meanwhile, the World Taiko Gathering was held in Los Angeles in 2014, hosted by TAIKOPROJECT. Organized by Bryan Yamami, the founder and artistic director of TAIKOPROJECT, this conference was structurally identical to the preceding eight NATCs but carefully positioned to operationalize a "world" rather than a North American taiko scene. The event, which helped fill the void produced by the cancellation of the 2013 NATC, featured ensembles from Mexico, Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Australia, and the usual North American participants attended in droves.

As new groups proliferate, new repertoire has flooded into the scene and the understood categories of repertoire have become more explicit. Some pieces are anonymous, traditional and known to all: for instance, virtually every group has a version of "Matsuri." At the other end of the spectrum, the most accomplished professional musicians (like those in On Ensemble) continuously generate beautiful, intricate pieces that the taiko community admires but can't and wouldn't ever play. Some works can be learned and performed with permission, which often means learning directly from the originator, who is always acknowledged. Acknowledging ownership is increasingly emphasized without hardening the movement of ideas; rather, the praxis of respect now includes attention to where pieces come from. In the middle of this range of repertoire is a body of works that have been produced intentionally *for* the community of performers. Not coincidentally, many of these include bon-odori. Whether called open source, open access, or copyleft, a small but commanding number of pieces have been created since 2005 that deliberately fling the doors wide by declaring themselves authored but unowned.

TAIKO IN CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In this book, I follow taiko through Southern California and a few other places, including Japan. I focus on taiko in the US contexts I know best, which have been

shaped by the neoliberal multiculturalism of California. Let me offer a brief overview of the progression from liberal to corporate to neoliberal multiculturalism, which is now the defining framework for much US-based cultural heritage work. In the 1980s and 1990s, struggles in higher education over the core curriculum led to powerful new recognition of how systemic inequality generates multiple stories about history. While many areas of the humanities subsequently decentered the old canons, the newly diverse landscape was promptly rendered less threatening by retreating to the liberal humanist position that all subjects are created equal. Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston were assigned alongside Shakespeare and William Faulkner. In the 1990s and 2000s, the ideology of corporate multiculturalism mapped this benign, nonconfrontational approach to difference onto the workplace and then onto global capitalist strategies. Neoliberal capitalism posits that all relationships can or even should be defined in market terms. As Jodi Melamed (2006, 1) argues, neoliberal strategists deploy multiculturalism “as the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity.” I refer repeatedly to the shaping force of multicultural ideologies on taiko because Asian American culturemaking takes place within these terms, not despite them. When taiko groups perform in multicultural festivals, films, or TV ads, we not only fulfill those terms but provide pleasure. Neoliberal multiculturalism can make viewers feel good about themselves. These powerful and invasive ideologies irrevocably define North American taiko, but they don’t provide the only possible narratives: performance can maintain other ways of knowing and generate essential strategies for cultural self-determination. As Will Kymlicka (2013, 99) writes, “If neoliberalism has shaped social relations, it is equally true that those relations have shaped neoliberalism, blocking some neoliberal reforms entirely while pushing other reforms in unexpected directions, with unexpected results. In the process, we can see social resilience at work as people contest, contain, subvert, or appropriate neoliberal ideas and policies to protect the social bonds and identities they value.” As this book proceeds, I try to ward off the celebratory stories about taiko that neoliberal multiculturalism demands even as I discover the many ways that Asian American taiko practitioners reach deep and imagine otherwise.²⁰

My primary research methodology was ethnographic, informed by participation. I didn’t set out to achieve bimusicality—the ethnomusicological practice of learning how to play an instrument as a formal ethnographic method, with sustained effort and long-term commitment—but that’s where I ended up.²¹ I initially started taking taiko classes in 1997 not for research but because I was moved and compelled by taiko as an Asian American. I began to think of it as study *and* research after about a year of deepening engagement: I was consumed by it as a practicing musician and fascinated by it as an ethnomusicologist and Asian American studies scholar. Once I got past the initial learning curve (which took about a year), I wanted to get a lot better as a musician and I wanted a deeper

understanding of everything I saw going on around the Taiko Center of Los Angeles (TCLA). I didn't realize it at the time, but those years were an important juncture in the North American kumi-daiko scene. It was the moment just before taiko suddenly and rapidly expanded. The first NATC was held in 1997, and I participated in it without fully understanding how historic it was. I was deeply involved with the TCLA, taking classes and eagerly committing to Satori Daiko, the center's performing ensemble, when Rev. Tom formed it in 1999. I routinely videotaped events and some of our rehearsals and performances, I began to formally interview Rev. Tom after a year or two, and I began to follow other taiko groups by attending as many performances as possible. I threw myself into taiko as both a practitioner and an ethnomusicologist. This simultaneous engagement was mostly easy and natural, though at times I knew I was more critical than some of my taiko peers. My ethnographic immersion in the taiko scene was necessarily autoethnographic. In this book I draw on my own experiences as a source of information, but I also locate myself in my ethnographic logoi without making myself its focus. For me, autoethnography is a sustained commitment to metalearning (Dunbar-Hall 2009, 159). I am especially drawn to how autoethnographic work on music "frees the voice and body from the conventional and restrictive mind-body split that continues to pervade traditional academic writing," as Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis (2009, 10) put it. Freeing oneself from that binary is neither simple nor entirely possible, but autoethnographic work on music can get inside the act of listening in ways that I hope ethnomusicologists will own as time goes on. Aurality offers extraordinary entrée into the body and can take us beyond the tired trope of embodiment.

Ethnography was only one part of my methodology, though the ethnographic impulse is evident in everything I do. I deploy close reading quite a bit, especially when unpacking a television commercial in chapter 7, because its critical techniques are already so virtuosically well developed. When reading video footage or still photographs, I offer ethnographic examinations that issue from my unitary subject position as an ethnomusicologist yet also a taiko player. I sometimes thought of my efforts as fieldwork, sometimes as rehearsal, and always as a lifelong commitment. I wrote a book (Wong 2004) about Asian American musicking during my early years of learning taiko. My ethnographic work with taiko players was an open-ended midcareer project. I never intended to go home afterward or to declare the research "done" in the ways made necessary when earning a degree or tenure. I was shaped by the postcrisis assumptions described by George E. Marcus (2009), who muses that most anthropological research since the 1980s has invited and expected incompleteness and derailment.

I have roamed around the kumi-daiko world but spent most of my time as a member of the TCLA and Satori Daiko. I have taken workshops with many of the extraordinary first- and second-generation North American taiko teachers,

including Kenny Endo, Tiffany Tamaribuchi, PJ Hirabayashi, Roy Hirabayashi, and yes, Tanaka-sensei, for one *odaiko* workshop. Still, I have never studied at length with any of them, nor have I learned with any of the most famous taiko groups from the founding generation, such as San Francisco Taiko Dojo, San Jose Taiko, Kinnara Taiko, or Soh Daiko. Some taiko players may look askance at my knowledge base. As will become clear in this book, my teacher Rev. Tom Kurai (1947–2018) was in on the ground floor of North American kumi-daiko and the Asian American Movement, but he charted his own course. As a Zen Buddhist priest, he was not part of the extensive network of Jodo Shinshu Japanese American Buddhist temples on the West Coast which sustain the bon-odori tradition. He never created a nonprofit organization: the TCLA was a (modest) for-profit enterprise and part of how he earned a living.²² He was well known but not part of Tanaka-sensei's lineage. Heidi Varian's (2013) book is authoritative because it represents Tanaka-sensei's teachings; Shawn Bender's (2012) book is riveting because he learned from inside the *ur*-groups Kodo and Sukeroku. My book is not like either of those immensely important works. I have learned a lot and have walked through doors opened by my association with Rev. Tom, but at the same time my experiences—usefully, I think—don't reflect the authoritative, canonic core of North American taiko, if there is such a thing. Methodologically, this has been valuable, yet I sometimes felt acutely aware that I wasn't going to be able to tell the story of North American taiko in ways that some taiko players would want to hear it told.

While I hope that taiko practitioners will find at least some of their priorities reflected in these pages, this book is driven by broader critical concerns. I circle around six interrelated critical issues as I proceed.

First, I reflect on this extended historical moment in the early twenty-first century in which taiko has exploded into a global phenomenon. The viral expansion of taiko from a post-World War II invented tradition to the world music du jour raises questions of tradition, invention, ownership, and specific circuits of desire that have transported taiko from its most recent communities of origin (i.e., Japanese Americans) into Western Europe, Latin America, and now Southeast Asia and parts of East Asia. Taiko may be a globalized tradition, but I ask how, where, and why that happened.

Second, I address Asian American memory and community building in the troubled context of corporate multiculturalism in the backyard of the entertainment industry. It is no coincidence that taiko moves around the world as easily and nonarbitrarily as anime, video games, and manga. Taiko has expanded precisely because this is the historical moment when US neoliberalism has been normalized and the Pacific Rim is simply assumed to be an open field of exchange.

Third, I follow the trail of Asian American social justice work, from pilgrimages to the Japanese American incarceration camps to new articulations of Asian

American and Asian Canadian feminism. If some taiko practitioners seem a little too willing for taiko to be for “everyone” and thus not about memory and social justice, others choose to remember.²³

Fourth, I explore taiko’s restless movement between music and noise. Drawing from sound studies, I consider how taiko fills space with sound and operationalizes the formation of bodies politic. I argue that taiko’s spillover from music to noise transforms taiko players’ stunning corporeal discipline into an unruly invasive sonic presence that has political implications.

Fifth, I trace how taiko practitioners address cultural sustainability, through both intentional organization building and the broader play of “traditional culture,” which is always mediated. Cultural sustainability is nominally about traditional practices but is really about community survival. Taiko is in no danger of disappearance, but as with all intangible cultural heritage, the question is how its communities of practice are defined and how they expand, contract, or vanish. I attend closely to the extraordinary ways that “the taiko community” engages in metareflection, hyperreflexivity, and incessant self-documentation, driven by a distinctively postwar Sansei preoccupation with history. I also address the work of music, including improvisation and generating new repertoire.

Sixth and by no means least, I listen to the cultural politics of emotion in taiko (Ahmed 2004). I have encountered few musics as profoundly about energy, joy, and passion. Having written that—and acutely aware that taiko is hardly unique in the ways it lifts, carries, and sustains people both collectively and individually—I ask how and why taiko practitioners and audiences feel so deeply. Emotion is political.

This book is shaped by these questions. Though I have separately enumerated them, they percolate throughout the book, surfacing and then resubmerging. No chapter is devoted to only one of these issues. Always I ask how taiko is a political project. It is hard not to notice that some taiko players, taiko groups, and taiko scholars deny or ignore how taiko is an Asian American political project.

People may first encounter taiko in a Hollywood commercial film, at a Japanese American Buddhist temple, in an arcade game, at a world music festival, on a college campus, in a car advertisement, at a multicultural civic festival, at a corporate reception, at the NATC or the World Taiko Gathering, or on YouTube. An all-inclusive approach to twenty-first-century taiko simply isn’t possible, though I try to convey the richness of its scenes.

Taiko is a leisure activity for many of its North American practitioners, pursued in the hours outside a job or classes. Is it a First World practice, and does its dissemination signal a desire for a certain kind of class politics? Kumi-daiko materialized in postwar Japan at precisely the moment when that demilitarized nation was being reinvented by the US victor: its young Japanese originators were anxious about the disappearance of Japanese culture, but the very terms of that

disappearance were bound up with a dramatic change in class formations. Taiko seems so quaintly and dynamically folkloric, yet its cultural specificity is inextricably interlaced with cosmopolitan ideologies about global circulation. Why has such a specifically Japanese form of performance traveled so far, and why is it pursued so passionately by such a broad range of practitioners, from those with Japanese heritage to those with no direct Japan connection at all? Taiko is far from alone in this: certain kinds of music and dance are practiced on a world stage, but such movement is never arbitrary.²⁴ If the *djembe* and didgeridoo are played in multiple First World communities far from West Africa or Aboriginal Australia, their enthusiasts pursue ideas about Elsewheres via heavily mediated conduits (Magowan 2005).

Taiko is spectacularly recognizable: its form is vivid, invasive, and “colorful” (that tired marker of the ethnic). That form is an accumulation of sonic and visual ethnic indicators. Beyond its splendid visuality, its sonic form is instantly parsed: the sound of many drums floods through any space, whether indoors or out. The literary theorist Michael Davidson (2008, 743) argues for a “cosmopoetics” of form that reveals the interactions of the cultural and the geopolitical under late capitalism. The cosmopoetics of taiko is based in a hardening of form that, at its most unthoughtful, allows for playful expansion but carries the terms of its own privileged First World, leisure-class empowerment. Indeed, it is precisely the hardening of form that makes taiko so instantly recognizable and nameable. Although kumi-daiko is irrefutably hybrid and has been since its postwar emergence in the hands of a Japanese jazz drummer, its practitioners often assert its authenticity, couched in a First World longing for a preindustrial moment outside history. García Canciani (2014, 17) urges us to “get out of this binary” between “epic accounts of the achievements of globalization” and “melodramatic narratives from the fissures, violence, and pain of interculturality.” I hope my treatment of taiko as contemporary and intercultural is both theorized and matter-of-fact. I argue that one cannot address the epic expansion of kumi-daiko without referring over and over again to the original wound of the Japanese American incarceration.

I take a critical step in this book that I believe makes my work different from other scholars’, and they may not agree with my position. I argue that taiko is well into a process of deterritorialization and destratification that reflects its location in late capitalist circuits of dissemination in precisely the manner posited by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Both inside and outside Japan, taiko groups proliferate, but its practitioners generally sidestep fraught matters of class, commoditization, ownership, and mediatization. The Japanese American organizations that have supported the growth of the North American kumi-daiko scene are intensely focused on autodocumentation for just that reason. I deploy ethnography to address this process, focusing on specific people, places, and moments to understand how kumi-daiko is becoming less tied to place. Ethnomusicologists and musicologists

are only slowly beginning to address how and why certain specific musical practices go global. Some, like K-pop, were practically designed to do so. Taiko wasn't and isn't, but it has gone global, unevenly and nonarbitrarily. The relationship between late capitalist racial fantasy and commodified heritage is precisely what makes taiko so uncontrollably popular, rendering replication easy and relying on Asian American practitioners as willing accomplices.

I acknowledge that I have an incomplete understanding of *wadaiko* (traditional drumming in Japan), a California-centric understanding of the scene, and no training in the Japanese language. My commitment to ground-level participatory ethnographic work is both a strength and a limitation. My strengths include thirteen years (1997–2009) of passionate, immersive engagement in the Southern California taiko scene as a student and performer with the TCLA; five study trips to Japan under the guidance of my taiko teacher Rev. Tom Kurai; and stints as a guest member of Triangle Taiko in Raleigh, North Carolina (2005–6), as an observer of Kokyo Taiko in Chicago for ten weeks (2004), as a bon-odori dancer in innumerable SoCal Obon festivals, as a participant in the NATC (1997, 1999, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2011) and the ECTC (2012, 2014), as an observer at the World Taiko Gathering (2014), as a participant in the intensive three-day planning workshop for the Taiko Community Alliance (2013), as a passionately committed student in the Summer Taiko Institute's Women and Taiko workshop (2017), and as a member of "the taiko community," that nebulous formation both real and imagined, oft cited by taiko players. I know a lot about certain things and I don't know much about others. The problem is that taiko means too much. Maybe it's in too many places; maybe it's being forced to do too many kinds of cultural work.

MULTIMEDIA ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

This book is based in multimedia ethnomusicology: visual and audio analysis is central to my purpose. Scholarship on performance must exceed the limits of any given medium (Denzin 2003). The loud physicality of taiko begs for the thing itself, but any research on performance should push at the limits of the page. The translative act of moving from performance to thinking about it is literally and inevitably mediated, and different media create different ways of thinking. Humanities scholars have privileged one medium—the word. I was shaped fundamentally by the 1980s humanistic turn in anthropology that involved embracing the word, so I have no desire to leave it behind, but I believe a more restless attention to different media could reenergize ethnomusicology and related performance-based disciplines. Ethnomusicologists take sound, movement, and materiality more seriously than scholars in many other disciplines, but we haven't yet realized the fullest implications of our own interests, because we inevitably pull materiality straight back into the word.

I am proud that this book will appear in an open-access digital format, which enables the multimedia ethnomusicology for which I am eager. Open-access and open-source work are the foundation of public scholarship. As mentioned above, a handful of taiko and bon-odori leaders have created open-source pieces with great intention, working toward a certain vision of community founded on collaboration and anticommodity processes. I am beholden to their model: they fashion works meant to live in the community and to travel far. I have learned from them and emulate them here. This book isn't mine; this book is part of a process. All faults and inaccuracies are mine, but I want this book to be available as widely as possible, and the open-source digital format offered by University of California Press is thus deeply appealing to me.

The Japanese American taiko community is intensely inclined toward self-documentation and self-narrative—even self-mythologizing. The institutionalization of the history of the Japanese American incarceration (1942–45) is the result of a successful political project to reclaim who gets to relate history (Creff 2004). Documentation and reading the past-as-documented are ubiquitous in the Japanese American community. When I use my own video camera or audio recorder to document events or to conduct interviews, I almost always feel redundant and as if I have somehow become part of a larger commemorative project whose terms I never agreed to. I document objects and interlocutors who have already been historicized and incorporated into a broad narrative.

This ethnographic study is thus already mediatized. The digital is no mere accompaniment to this book, nor simply a place to store rich media. The best multimedia books are significantly different from hard-copy or even e-books. The visual anthropologist Sarah Pink (2013, 6) calls for ethnographers to “reject . . . the idea that the written word is necessarily a superior medium of ethnographic representation. While images should not necessarily replace words as the dominant mode of research or representation, they should be regarded as an equally meaningful element of ethnographic work.” Pink clears the way for closer attention to all the senses: she acknowledges that “visual anthropology” really demands the kind of sensuous anthropology imagined by Paul Stoller (1997). I aim to put my book's materials into dialogic relationships. Rather than “use” video, photos, and sounds to illustrate my text, I configure them to make visible the media-saturated environment in which all multicultural practices now circulate. An ethnography of racialized heritage work must put mediated representational practices front and center, not as “evidence” of ideology but as the very means for action and response. I assume that all parts of this environment are constituted through media practices—that there is no distinction between the thing itself and its mediated representation.

I wrote and designed this book in a mostly linear mode: my arguments build on one another as the book proceeds. Still, I don't think this book should necessarily

be read in order. Reading changes all the time; some of you may read one chapter and nothing else; others may skip around to the parts you most care about. As Ken Wissoker (2013, 133) has written, “It is when we think of the book as media that we can begin to see how much this is a transitional, even disruptive and disrupted, moment in the history of the book.” I wrote this book over many years and then rearticulated and reorganized it over several more. I think I have tried to make it into two different kinds of books: one is shaped by my generation- and history-bound knowledge of print monographs, and the other is an open-access digital book whose readership I don’t want to control. I can’t (yet) write with the “rhizomatic plurality” imagined by Wissoker (136), but the rising generations of taiko players might, and I look forward to that.

The sociologists Bella Dicks and Bruce Mason (1998, 2.2–2.9; Mason and Dicks 2001) cogently identify the ethnographic tensions between the death of the author and the shift toward more dialogic, open-ended forms of representation. As they put it, there are “two related areas of concern within ‘post-paradigm ethnography’: to rethink how ethnography’s subject-matter is defined, and to radicalise how it is written” (Dicks and Mason 1998, 2.7). As a discipline, ethnomusicology has struggled with both those challenges. Ethnomusicologists have yet to address an additional problem: the (literal) absence of sound in our scholarship. One could say that this broad problem faces all scholarship of the live—the thing itself shudders and disappears. It is so ephemeral that we spend considerable critical energy creating an object that will permit sustained attention. We are fixed on two mechanisms: reading (a process thoroughly imbedded in a noetics of the printed word and the visual cultures that followed) and the act of translating across media. Refashioning the thing-that-is-studied is second nature to us; we do it almost automatically.

A serious critical multimedia scholarship is the single most unique and important thing performance scholars could offer to the humanities. By placing performance at the center of our critical gestures, we could fashion something profoundly different. I imagine a multimedia ethnomusicology along the following lines:

1. Sound and movement are incommensurate with word-based scholarly practices. The CD or DVD tucked into the back of a book cover reenacts this incommensurability; the website that “accompanies” the book text reinstantiates it. A multimedia ethnomusicology would reincorporate the word into the bachi strike on the head of the drum or the taiko player’s shout.
2. A multimedia ethnomusicology cannot be described in a how-to manner: it can’t be codified or outlined in a primer. The modalities will change continually. We can talk about different software platforms, but that isn’t really the point. We must focus on what we aim to do, and assume that the means will continually change, often radically.

3. A multimedia ethnomusicology will necessarily create unstable objects that would be at once more aesthetic and more open ended. We could engage with our material and our interlocutors in a more playful, creative, respectful, and commanding manner via nontextual media.

The two most radical epistemological discontinuities offered by digital publication are the break with linearity and the intensified interaction between writer and reader. Most scholarly electronic publications indulge in neither. Quite a few electronic journals have enlivened the scope of scholarly music publications.²⁵ All are noteworthy, but only a few make full use of multimedia possibilities. Most are simply full of text, with an occasional graphic illustration or streaming audio file; to put it another way, they feature lightly enhanced text. Ethnomusicologists have used the internet for “virtual field sites,” online textbooks, and digital pedagogy. Suzel Ana Reily (2003, 190) notes, “Perhaps the area that has been least developed within ethnomusicology pertains to sites that draw on the interactive potential of the Internet as a means of exemplifying a given theoretical proposition,” and she points to Jeff Titon’s 1993 website on the old-time fiddler Clyde Davenport as a strong early example. Mark Slobin’s simple but beautiful 2003 website on his research in Afghanistan is a metamorphosis of his first book, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan* (1976). The entire book is present as downloadable PDF chapters, but the website doesn’t simply replicate the book: it addresses a series of critical issues through text, still images, video clips, and MP3 audio files. I am also influenced by the anthropologist Shelly Errington and her course on multimedia ethnography at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Errington suggests that “thinking visually” and thinking through sound are key hallmarks of a multimedia ethnography, and she argues that this requires the ability “to engage while informing.”²⁶ These are some of the models that have inspired my book.

My multimedia ethnography attempts to resituate the place of representational practices in our interpretive practice. The crisis of representation has paralyzed ethnomusicologists, and we simply must step up to the terms of a Baudrillardian mediasphere. As ethnographers, we must wade into it and make its terms our own. Ethnography will become increasingly quaint and irrelevant if its noetics are severely text centered; we cannot remain mired in the unidirectional quandary of *How do I represent them?* Performance-centered research has the potential to create new intersubjective relationships, but this will happen only if we urge it to overrun our expectations.

I have tried to call forth that excess of hope here. You are welcome to buy a hard copy of this book, but I hope you will read it online, in fits and starts. I hope you will click on a link to a photo or a video and allow it to stream as you read so that my words and the movements run into each other. If you are a scholar, I hope you will hear how deeply inter- and intratextual my ideas are, built on the fine work of other antiracist writers. If you are a taiko player, I can feel you reading over

my shoulder. I have felt you beside me for all the many years I have spent writing this book. You are my touchstone, my comrade, and my ethical base. I owe you. I wouldn't care so much about all of this if it weren't for you. I hope at least some of your finest experiences have been or will be like mine, and if you are driven by the sweat and rumble half as fast toward utopian hope as I was, well then, my work here is done.

Transition

Don

DON! Taiko players know what *don* means, whether trained in Japan, in North America, or elsewhere. *DON!* By itself, just the one syllable, it means a strong right-handed bachi strike on either a chudaiko or an odaiko. Not on a shime: that would be *ten*, not *don*. Of course, the left hand can also play *don*, but by itself the syllable implies an emphatic, assertive leading right-hand strike. You might well hear it as the last stroke at the end of *oroshi*, the dramatic drum roll that ends many pieces: the right and left hands alternate, starting very slowly, then gradually speeding up, then gradually slowing down again, and that final right-hand strike comes down only after a ki-filled pause and perhaps a sustained *kakegoe* (e.g., *i-yooooooo*), followed by *don!*, pushed powerfully and loudly into the drum with the entire body behind it.

The mnemonic *don* is part of an extensive system for vocalizing music, often for pedagogical purposes. Japanese music is full of mnemonic systems: not only can you “speak” nearly any kind of Japanese music, but there’s probably a codified way to do it. *Kuchi shōga* (also sometimes rendered as *kuchi showa* or *kuchi shoka*) is the phonetic system for uttering drum strokes, whether taiko or *tsuzumi* (the small two-headed drum featured in the music for Noh and Kabuki). *Kuchi shōga* is meant to be heard, though it is also written down—in katakana, the Japanese syllabary, not the Chinese-derived kanji—for pedagogical purposes and as a performance prompt. It is and isn’t fixed: a core set of widely accepted syllables is understood by most musicians, but new and idiomatic syllables are common, tied to specific performing ensembles or pieces. Although some of its meaning is contextual, each syllable may indicate several parameters at once: duration, volume, which kind of drum is being played, which part of the drum is being struck. *Don doro-doro-doro*, for instance, is a quarter note followed by six eighth notes, played in the center of the drumhead of either a chudaiko or an odaiko. *Don kara-kara-kara* is the same rhythmic pattern—a quarter note followed by six eighth notes—with *don* played in the center of the drumhead and the eighth notes played on the rim, with the bachi clattering brightly

against the wooden frame. *Ten teke-teke-teke* is, again, the same rhythm but played on a *shime daiko*, with the *bachi* striking the center of the drumhead. A wide range of syllables indicate rests, including *su*, *ho*, *sa*, and *iya*. The rest, the space of silence or the absence of sound, is in fact often filled with sound as *kuchi shōga* overlap with the *ki*-filled shouts (*kiyai* or *kakegoe*) that are so characteristic of *kumi-daiko* and the Japanese martial arts. Silence is dynamic but often filled.

Musicians learn their parts by speaking or singing the *shōga* before touching an instrument. The body, the voice, and the mouth (*kuchi*) usually come first. *Kuchijamisen* is the system of onomatopoeic syllables used to teach *koto* (the thirteen-stringed zither), though the term suggests it derives from *shamisen* (*jamisen*) playing (Adriaansz 1973, 41–42). For instance, a distinctive melodic and kinesthetic pattern found in many *shamisen* pieces is signified by the mnemonic *terenton*, which Philip Flavin (2008, 186) describes as “the syllabic realization of *moro-bachi*, a melodic pattern created by a down-stroke plus up-stroke on the third string followed by a down-stroke, usually on the open second string.” Blown instruments like the *hichiriki* and the *fue* have their own mnemonic systems. *Kuchi shōga* implies different parameters, from the production of sound on particular instruments to the pedagogical interface between student, teacher, and repertoire.

While *kuchi shōga* is centrally part of musical practice, its mnemonic syllables can also be used to describe a broader onomatopoeic world of sound beyond music. Not every *kuchi shōga* syllable is found in the extramusical world, but some are, and *don* is one of them. As I noted in the introduction, the compound word *pika-don* is a powerful example of a *don* sound that is now irrevocably part of the Japanese historical soundscape. Curious, I asked some friends and colleagues, mostly ethnomusicologists and all specialists in Japanese culture, “What other things make a *don* sound?” They described an evocative range of contexts worth laying out in some detail, not least for the sheer delight of seeing/reading/hearing one soundworld but also because the array of meanings are connected, and that web tells us something about *taiko*. Or rather, *taiko* tells us something about the affective world of Japanese and Japanese American sound. I reflect here on the dialogic relationship between that affective soundworld and *kumi-daiko*. Sound and listening are interconstitutive, and languaging about sound constructs what we hear. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier (2014, 7–8) evocatively writes, “Listening is not a practice that is contained and readily available for the historian in one document but instead is enmeshed across multiple textualities, often mentioned in passing, and subsumed under other apparent purposes such as the literary, the grammatical, the poetic, the ritual, the disciplinary, or the ethnographic. If sound appears as particularly disseminated across different modes of inscription and textualities it is because, located between the worldly sound source from which it emanates and the ear that apprehends it, the sonorous manifests a particular form of spectrality in its acoustics.” Languaging about the sound of *taiko* is part of the meaningful array of sounds musicians make. Significantly, it creates a dialogical space for how *taiko* players hear themselves.

Don implies something being struck. Thunder makes the sound *gorogoro* until it strikes the ground, at which point it sounds like *don*. *Don, don, don* is also specifically the sound of rain associated with thunder. *Don* is a deep resonant percussive sound, like knocking on a thick wall or door. A light knock on a door is *ton ton*, but if no one answers, your next knock might go *don don don*, with a deeper reverberation and more intent. *Don* implies something sudden with a powerful impact. When things collide—cars crashing together (*don to butsukaru*) or waves slamming against the shore—it sounds like *don*. A heavy kitchen knife repeatedly slicing or dicing something goes *dondondon*. *Don* also suggests something deliberate. Measured, slow steps, whether a giant's or a toddler's, go *don don don*. Godzilla's footsteps go *don* but are really more like *doshin doshin*, which communicates the impact of his foot followed by the shaking of the ground. *Don* signals resolve or confidence and can be used as a nononomatopoetic adverb, describing forward motion or progress while walking. In Japanese teenage film and television dramas, a male love interest may corner a girl and perform the *kabe-don*, a move where he slams one palm into the wall behind her—*don!*—while staring into her eyes and then asking her if she likes him.

Explosive things like fireworks, volcanoes, or bombs make the sound *don*, as do explosive beginnings: “Yoooi don” is uttered to mean *Ready, set, go!* before a race. A famous *enka* song (a form of Japanese popular music that draws heavily from traditional vocal techniques) titled “Dondon bushi” uses *don* to represent people exploding when they've been pushed too hard and too often (possibly referring to another *enka* song, “Dynamite bushi,” which explicitly likens people to dynamite). Some songs include onomatopoetic lyrics: “Don-Pan Bushi,” for example, is a *minyo* (folk song) from Akita Prefecture whose title and chorus imitate the sound of the taiko as *don-don, pan-pan, don-pan-pan*.

Don implies a deep dark timbre. In Kabuki, snow falling softly is depicted sonically by playing *don don don* on the odaiko. Japanese audiophiles may refer to *don-shari* sound, produced by loudspeakers with a heavy low tone and bright high tone. *Don* refers to the low tone and *shari* the high tone, and *don-shari* speakers are suitable for jazz but not classical music. Satomi Oshio² noted that *don* sometimes describes a low, faint sound in several traditional music mnemonic systems: when a *tsuzumi* makes a single weak sound, it mnemonically goes *don*. She also observed that *don* suggests a correlation between register and timbre: on shamisen, the sound of the open first string (the thickest and lowest in register) is *don*, whereas the second string goes *ton*, and the third, highest string goes *ten*. Noriko Manabe³ mused that vowels convey information about relative register—*on means a lower-pitched sound than *a or *en—and consonants about volume: *d** implies a louder sound than *t**.

While the sound of a chudaiko or odaiko doesn't evoke all those meanings, its affiliation with them calls them forth. A taiko playing *don don DON* is part of a sonic world of large emphatic forces. Sara Ahmed (2004, 11) writes, “Emotions can

move through the movement or circulation of objects. Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal or social tension.” Don is saturated with associations. Does a taiko sound like don, or were taiko made to evoke don-ness? How does don make us feel? How does our understanding of the world make us hear don-ness in certain ways? Don is a sound of power, or a powerful sound, or a signal that power is present. Apparently, don is a feeling as much as a sound. The sound of don assigns the feeling of power to things and people. Don is Japanese but moves around the world with/in taiko.