

Pain and the Body Politic

Taiko Players Talk about Blisters and More

The taiko players I know are driven by a sense of mission. They tend to feel that taiko is one of the most compelling things anyone, anywhere, could do. They spend little time engaged in reflexive consideration of the deepest terms of their own engagement—they are too busy playing. For an invented tradition so thoroughly embedded in political histories, taiko has given rise to narratives astonishingly devoid of anger or pain, which most taiko players seem to prefer. Indeed, the Southern California taiko scene is overwhelmingly a leisure environment filled with upper-middle-class Asian American amateurs who are willing to cite pride in heritage but are consistently unlikely to acknowledge the radical conditions that taiko prophesies.

Taiko players are less and less likely, as time goes on, to address the specific circumstances that drew young Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans to this loud, exuberant form of performance in the 1970s and 1980s. Taiko was seized upon in California by Sansei, third-generation Japanese Americans, and then by other young Americans of Asian descent, when the Asian American Movement emerged, alongside other identity movements of that period. Anger over the Japanese American incarceration of 1942–45 was one of the drivers for the movement: that trauma helped create the political category of the Asian American. Lapsing back into silence about those hurts is the price of success.

I turn to the injury as a site of pain. Martha Stoddard Holmes and Tod Chambers (2005, 136) write that “a cultural history of pain . . . is the history of pain’s cultural products.” I begin with an inspection rooted in praxis and transmission, woven through with the ache of wrong and the dull stupidities of repetition. This is a self-examination: I evoke the proactive practice of checking your own breasts for lumps. This willing reflexivity means recognizing one’s own body as a place of injury and memory. Taiko has left its marks and its sounds on/in my body.

SELF-EXAMINATION

For twelve years I played taiko several times a week. I now hear a persistent rustle in my left ear—a low vibrating hum that sounds every two or three seconds. It starts softly and then gets louder and stops. Then it does this again, and again, endlessly. I'm aware of it only when I'm in quiet places, especially lying in bed at night, when I sometimes listen to it with mixed horror and pride. After rehearsals it thrummed loudly in my head and would take a while to subside to its usual quiet purr. It sounds nothing like taiko, but it is an aftereffect, an echo of the loud sounds I immersed myself in for so many years.

My hands are a map of taiko past and present. Blisters and calluses come and go. I came to love the progression of playing a lot, several times a week, so that blisters formed and hardened into dry scabs and eventually became calluses. Every few months I achieved the perfect calluses, depending on our performance schedule: four on my right hand (the hand that works the hardest) and one on my left. Three on my right hand were at the top of the palm, at the base of my middle, ring, and little fingers, and the fourth was about three-quarters of an inch below my index finger, further into my palm. At their best, all four of these calluses were hard yellow bumps, sometimes with dark subterranean spots left over from blood blisters. My left hand usually got only one callus, at the base of my little finger. If I didn't play much—say, only once a week for rehearsal—the calluses worked loose, gradually peeling off and leaving soft new skin behind that was a blister waiting to happen. That's how I thought of my soft hands: as a blister waiting to happen. The absence of callused labor both was a mark of shame and anticipated pain that would again lead to pride.

Two of my fingers have stiff joints, probably from old fractures. Sometimes you whack your hand by accident when you play. I can't say how many times I've done this—more than I can count—but I'm familiar with the sharp impact and a buzzing feeling of numb shock, and then the throbbing pain that follows. If I hit myself, it was usually during a performance, but I never stopped or acknowledged it—I kept playing, and the heart of that stoicism was the effort never to break out from the group. At least two of those whacks resulted in what I'd guess were small fractures: the joints (in my right index finger and, another time, my left thumb) turned dark red and hurt quite a lot for quite a while. My left thumb now clicks when I flex it—I've picked up the habit of flexing it because it's pleasurable to feel the stiffness pop out and the thumb's full range of motion open. My right index finger is another matter, though: it's permanently stiff. When I make a fist, I can almost but not quite get that finger to wrap itself closed—it won't go the final fraction of an inch.

My pride is macho and masochistic. It comes from a world where pain is a sign of effort. Why didn't we wear earplugs? you might ask. Of course, we should have, and I should have asked Rev. Tom to make it a policy for his classes. It's not the aural damage I'm proud of—it's the fact that taiko has left its mark on me.

LOCATING THE BODY POLITIC

I have written elsewhere about taiko players' constant conversations about joy (Wong 2004, 195; 2008, 76–77). Joy is a central fact of the taiko experience—especially for Asian American women—and I don't mean to downplay it here, though I have been too ready to theorize it as a performative mechanism for empowerment. The play of pain and masochism is equally important in taiko praxis. The experience of, and pleasure in, pain defines the very body that then exults in its own presence. To bring this into view, I draw connections between the Japanese American incarceration, Asian American identifications, the cross-generational effects of pain, Japanese postwar ideas about the Japanese body, and Japanese American ideas about Japan.

Taiko makes possible the formation of a loud Japanese/Asian/American body politic in the postincarceration public sphere. Moving from the particular to the collective body is the key challenge in ethnography: the researcher must explain how the people she knows represent something bigger than themselves that is shaped by hierarchies of authority and control. As scholars of performance, we easily intuit how an individual body helps create a body politic through performance, yet this is also the matter most difficult to explain. And whose body politic? A body politic is always present, even in moments when the state is benign and distracted. Writing during the Iraq War, Judith Butler (2004, 25) asked why the body is regarded as autonomous and our own. She questioned whether an assumed bodily integrity is organically related to self-determination and whether a politics of the body can “open up” or foreclose connections to other bodies:

Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do. Indeed, if I deny that prior to the formation of my “will,” my body related me to others whom I did not choose to have in proximity to myself, if I build a notion of “autonomy” on the basis of the denial of this sphere of a primary and unwilled physical proximity with others, then am I denying the social conditions of my embodiment in the name of autonomy? (26)

Is there a taiko body politic at this historical moment, two generations out from the Japanese American incarceration, during an interlude when (many) Japanese Americans are part of a privileged upper middle class for whom taiko is a leisure activity, when Asian Americans are thoroughly ensconced in the US imagination as model minorities, regarded as flush with educational privilege and transnational capital . . . and when taiko players of European descent are flocking to the drums, eager to believe that anyone can play taiko? At this precise moment, how does taiko provide an ideal stage for exploring the distribution of pain across generations and bodies, shared through anger and memory?¹ Surely a body politic can

be varied, mixed, assorted, ungainly, poorly assembled, awkward, and straining at the seams. Sometimes I think that too many kinds of people claim the right to be part of the taiko body politic.

FAILING AT FORM

Japanese Americans regard Japanese taiko players with respect, envy, resentment, and defiance, all at once. Japanese American, other Asian American, and indeed non-Japanese taiko players generally deeply romanticize Japanese taiko. It is always more authoritative than American taiko, and the line of interest and exploration is almost entirely unidirectional: it is understood that North American taiko players need to know as much as they can about Japanese taiko, but the reverse is not true. As a result, the relationship of North American practice to Japanese form is both apprehensive and submissive.² A North American taiko player should emulate Japanese kata (stance), but this sets up an anticipation of failure because North American taiko is never authoritative. Yet innovation and other changes are ubiquitous: few North American taiko groups choose to play only Japanese repertoire, and many are composing new pieces and deliberately creating specifically North American repertoire. The dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2005, 660) offers a useful example of how insurgents like these can participate in a high-status practice. He shows that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater succeeded because its Black company achieved both “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery,” terms borrowed from Houston Baker—that is, through Ailey’s choreography, the company embodied and enacted both an expert mastery of dancerly technique informed by ballet genealogy and a distinctively African American sensibility that signified on those forms.³ Similarly, North American taiko players invoke Japanese form but comment on it through change, extension, rejection, and even parody. The unspoken but always present relationship between the authoritative original and its feisty, inauthentic, immigrant offspring is constantly at work.

Yet the Japanese body isn’t stable either. The anthropologist Laura Spielvogel (2003, 39–40) argues that the body has long served as “an extension of the nation” in Japan and suggests that Japanese attitudes toward sports offer a window onto Japan-US relations. The militaristic Japanese government enforced standardized callisthenic routines in the first half the twentieth century, promoting “a nationalist spirit . . . encoded in the body through a repetition of form,” based on the Zen principle of the deep interrelationship of the body and spirit. This body was effectively defeated and rendered “diseased and starving” by the American military, which then nursed it back to health using Western principles of hygiene and medicine that transformed the corporeal national spirit into a modernized body, ready to engage with democracy and global capitalism. American aerobics and fitness clubs were imported to Japan in the 1980s and became popular among leisure-class

women by the 1990s, and Spielvogel argues that these clubs produced a thin but muscular body that represented a powerful conflation of values: health and beauty could be attained in spaces for middle-class women who were otherwise subject to pervasive patriarchal expectations of selflessness and domestic service (84–85). Yet the shift was not a straight line from the militaristic, disciplined Japanese body to a commodified, modern, disciplined Western body. The role of pain in both suggests through lines that trouble any tidy narrative of postwar total transformation. As Spielvogel writes, “Like martial arts training, fitness clubs demand working through pain and discomfort to achieve a sense of accomplishment” (87).

The regard that North American taiko players have for the Japanese taiko body often involves a tacit admiration for extreme practices. The Japanese taiko player’s body is unnaturally strong: it emerges out of rigorous denial and endures pain without acknowledgment or admission. That body is always rebuking the North American taiko body. The North American body is often flabby, old, and out of shape. Maceo Hernández, a Southern California taiko teacher, reportedly tells his students to “play through the pain.” He’s Mexican American, not Japanese American, but he was trained in Japan by the influential group *Za Ondekoza*, undergoing an extraordinarily intense and sustained socialization as a taiko player while still a teenager. A documentary about Hernández details his rigorous physical regimen, as well as the loss of his left leg after metal pipes rolled off a truck and landed on him while he was out running (Esaki 1993).⁴ *Ondekoza*’s extreme approach to the body is deeply admired by most taiko players but rarely imitated. *Ondekoza* was one of the earliest Japanese *kumi-daiko* groups, and its members set the bar with a physicality that fascinates both audiences and amateur players: they practice an excessive fitness that is framed as necessary for the best playing. They ran incessantly, beginning the day by running six or more miles. *Ondekoza*’s philosophy is based on “*Sogakuron*,” the idea that running, music, and meditation reflect life energy and are therefore closely related.⁵ For their international debut, in 1975, they ran the Boston Marathon and then played a concert at the finish line. Since then, they have completed many “running tours” and “marathon tours,” in which combine extraordinary long-distance runs with concert performances.⁶ During their *Marathon Live Tour* in 2002, the group ran the almost four hundred miles from Sado Island to Mount Fuji and gave three concerts en route. And so on.

The anthropologist Shawn Bender (2012, 179–82) has argued that taiko was associated with ultranationalist, militarist fascism in prewar Japan (see previous chapter), and Tatsu Aoki, a Japanese American *Shin Issei* improviser, told me he thinks taiko is “totalitarian” in the way that it models discipline and obedience, even though it also offers tools for social presence and identity work.⁷ The imagined Japanese propensity for aesthetic and physical extremity haunts North American taiko players. But for Japanese Americans, that extremity is also a strategy for reconstitution: it is a means of reaching back to a body uninjured by incarceration or US history.

TALKING ABOUT PAIN

In 2007, many of us in Satori Daiko were feeling our age. Those of us in our forties and fifties were beset with physical problems, some caused by taiko and some not, all of which affected our playing. LizAnn had had hip replacement surgery a year after arthritis left her with bone rubbing on bone. Judi had rotator cuff surgery for one shoulder and was planning to have it for the other; she didn't play at all for four months. Harriet had shoulder problems too. Rev. Tom's knee had been bothering him for at least five years. A student in one of his other classes left somewhat bitterly because of shoulder pain.

I asked several of my taiko friends about pain and taiko. I don't know any taiko group that has specific policies or preventive measures for repetitive stress injuries, nor is it my purpose to call anyone out for the problem, nor do I think the deeper affective understanding of pain should (or could) change. Taiko players warm up and stretch and have extensive techniques that prepare the body physically, mentally, and spiritually for the work of playing. The following conversation shows how my friends and teacher regarded pain as the price of taiko.⁸ For them pain was a sign of real effort, was located in minute corners of the body that could be addressed with precision, and was evidence that you were playing wrong. Some of these attitudes are contradictory precisely because they are rooted in a very strong belief system that outlines affective relationships to the body.

We had just played a gig in San Pedro—a private birthday party—and were in Rev. Tom's van, waiting for everyone to finish packing up so we could all go find a restaurant and have a late dinner. While sitting in the dark van, I asked Shirley and Beverly whether they ever experienced pain as taiko players. Both were in their fifties and had played for many years. Listen to audio example 2, interview with Shirley Gutierrez and Beverly Murata about taiko and pain, February 22, 2007, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>, transcribed here:

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- Shirley I don't get pain playing taiko.
- Deborah What about blisters, don't you get blisters?
- Shirley Yeah, but that's hardly pain...
- Deborah That doesn't count as pain?
- Beverly My arm – I don't know what I did to it, but it still – I keep injuring it.
- Deborah You keep injuring your shoulder?
- Beverly It starts here, and it keeps going –
- Deborah Your right shoulder?
- Beverly – down my arm.
- Deborah Really? When does it hurt?
- Beverly Like tonight when I was playing. When I do a lifting-up motion.
- Deborah When you raise your arm above your shoulder?

- Beverly That's right. No, even just like this –
- Deborah Like that, wow. As high as your shoulder. What do you do when it hurts?
- Beverly Hm?
- Deborah What do you do when it hurts? You're playing, and it hurts – what do you do?
- Beverly Just keep playing! *[laughs]*
- Deborah Just keep playing! *[We both laugh out loud.]*
- Shirley You can't stop once you start.
- Deborah Why not? *[We all three laugh more quietly.] [pause]* I mean, are taiko players all a bunch of masochists? That's what I'm wondering – that's what I'm after here.
- Beverly Yes.
- Shirley Yes.
- Beverly *[laughs]* The show must go on!
- Deborah *[laughs] [pause]* But – have you always had that pain in your shoulder?
- Beverly No, it's been like the last couple months.
- Deborah Oh, it's recent.
- Beverly It gets better, and then it gets worse, and then you know, it gets better...
- Shirley *[quietly]* Maybe it gets better when you rest it.
- Beverly And then I lift up something heavy and I think I just re-... do whatever injury...
- Deborah Is it only when you play taiko?
- Beverly No. It's when I lift – lifting... *[she gestures]*
- Deborah Like – lifting a... briefcase.
[Beverly nods]
- Deborah OK. Do you think it's taiko-caused, or... something else? *[She nods.]* OK. OK. *[to Shirley]* You never get blisters??? Get outta here!
- Beverly I get little blisters.
- Shirley Weeell – a little bit, but not...
- Beverly Especially if I haven't played for a little while.
- Deborah Yeah, exactly.
- Shirley But if you get a blister forming, if you just, like, put a pin in it and let the water out, and then it doesn't pop and then it doesn't hurt.
- Deborah OK. What about if you play, like, the next day?
- Shirley If I play the next day, you have to catch it before it... *[very precisely]* popssss....
- Deborah So you have this whole... technique!
- Shirley And then it doesn't hurt.
- Deborah Really?!
- Shirley The only reason it hurts is because it pops and then you've got all that other stuff exposed.
- Beverly Right.
- Shirley But if the skin doesn't break and pop, *[whispers]* it doesn't hurt.

- Deborah So you do have a method basically, you don't apparently pick at them or anything like that. You just carefully pop them with a little pin...
- Shirley Yeah. You just, like, in the little corner, just put in a little hole and ssssqish out the water... [pause] That's it.
- Deborah That's it.
- Shirley And then it doesn't pop and it doesn't hurt!
- Deborah Wow. I need to take lessons from you or something, cuz...
- Shirley But you know, if you let it pop, then it's gonna hurt – all that skin underneath, exposed...
- Deborah It's raw.
- Shirley That's when it hurts.
- Deborah Do you ever get blood blisters?
- Shirley Nnn-no.
- Deborah Never! Dang. All right, where do you get blisters when you get 'em?
- Shirley Just like maybe... Around here.
- Deborah Oh really? That's pretty different from where I get them... What about – have you been playing a lot recently? Have you gotten blisters recently? [She shakes her head.] OK. Do you get pain anywhere else, ever, anytime, when you play?
- Shirley I used to, lifting up taiko... I don't anymore.
- Deborah Do you know why you don't anymore?
- Shirley Uhhh... I think – well, my physical therapist said –
- Deborah Oh!
- Shirley – it was probably pain from playing taiko, so he said take it easy for a couple of months.
- Deborah So hold it, you went to a physical therapist!
- Shirley No! I was going to a physical therapist before –
- Deborah Oh!
- Shirley – but since I was there, I thought, you know what? When I reach back, sometimes it hurts up here, so [unintelligible]. But if you, like, take it easy on taiko for a couple of months, you'll find that it's gonna be a lot better.
- Deborah Wow. What do you think he meant by taking it easy?
- Shirley Not... playing all out.
- Deborah All out. OK.
[Several other members of Satori Daiko get in the van and the doors are closed.]
- Shirley It came at the time when we had a holiday, so we had a break.
- Deborah A natural break?
- Shirley Yeah.
- Deborah So it actually got better...
- Shirley Mm.

- Deborah Not to be nosy, but was that when you were going about your knee...?
- Shirley Mm. So I said, you know what? Can you work on my shoulder too?
- Deborah Hmmm. What did he do when he worked on it?
- Shirley Ummm... Stretching it, and massaging it... And I was doing some exercises on the machines.
- Deborah Oh wow, so you had several things you were up to. Did he tell you to keep doing any of those things, just as a preventative thing?
- Shirley Ummm... no.
- Deborah Just stop playing taiko for a while! [*laughs*] Oh my gosh. So the knee thing wasn't related to taiko, right?
- Shirley No.
- Deborah OK. Do you ever hurt the next day, after playing?
- Shirley Uhhh – not the next day. Only from carrying the drums.
- Deborah [*laughs incredulously*] How do you know it's that!
[*Rev. Tom starts up the van. We're on the move.*]
- Shirley Well, it's usually my back!
- Deborah Ohhh, OK. You never ache the next day? OK, this woman is unreal...
- Rev. Tom [*From the driver's seat.*] Huh?
- Deborah I'm asking Shirley about pain.
- Rev. Tom Pain!
- Deborah She doesn't hurt the next day, ever.
- Rev. Tom Oh. From taiko?
- Deborah Just from – what did you say? Just from –
- Shirley – just from carrying the taikos.
- Rev. Tom From carrying the taiko...
- Deborah Something's wrong with this picture! Beverly, do you ever hurt the next day?
- Beverly Yeah.
- Deborah Me too. Where – where do you hurt?
- Beverly It depends on where I played wrong. [*cackles*]
- Deborah Where you played wrong? What did you say?
- Beverly Well, you know... If I play odaiko – [*unintelligible*]. Then I hurt here...
- Deborah Oh. Yeah. [*pause*]
- Rev. Tom You know, even though we played forty minutes tonight, I'm not going to feel it tomorrow. But when we played that four minutes – four minutes! –
- Beverly Yeah, but you played really hard.
- Rev. Tom – four minutes at the – where was it – at the Biltmore Hotel? And the next day I was sore.
- Deborah Really?

- Rev. Tom Yeah.
- Deborah What's the difference?
- Rev. Tom Because! I played, like, 200%.
- Beverly He was playing really hard!
- Deborah Oh, 200%!
- Rev. Tom On odaiko.
- Deborah Whhhhy did you put yourself out that day? Why –
- Rev. Tom 'Cause there were only –
- Beverly – Four of us.
- Rev. Tom Four of us.
- Deborah Oh, OK.
- Shirley He only had four minutes of fame.
- Rev. Tom There was a really big crowd.
- Deborah Big crowd, big room.
- Rev. Tom I wanted to make, you know, a big impact in the shortest amount of time.
- Deborah So you hurt the next day.
- Rev. Tom Yeah. You know, it's not the length of time – it's what you put into it.
- Deborah Ohhhhhh, OK.
- Rev. Tom It's what you put into it. [*We all laugh quietly and knowingly.*] So what does that say, Shirley??? [*Loud laughter all around.*]
- Shirley It might say I'm in better shape than you are!
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Notice the constellation of values around pain. Injuring and reinjuring yourself is business as usual. The expectation that you *just keep playing* even if you're hurting is both understood and a matter of amused self-awareness. Notice Shirley's precise attention to blisters and her pleasure in emptying them to prevent pain. Her rhythmic enunciation of prevented pain (*and then it doesn't pop and then it doesn't hurt*) and her onomatopoeic enjoyment of removing the possibility of pain (*just put in a little hole and sssssquish out the water*) are striking. She's talking literally about the matter of blisters, but it's hard not to hear at least a little metaphorical sensibility at work (*But you know, if you let it pop, then it's gonna hurt—all that skin underneath, exposed . . .*). Beverly and Rev. Tom agree that post-performance soreness is the result of either playing incorrectly (tensely) or playing "hard," all out, which is a good thing. *What you put into it* is presumably what you get out of it, and in this case, more is more, and the mark of success is pain.

Far more research has been done on music as therapy than on music and pain. Indeed, taiko is often referenced as a kind of ersatz therapy—how many times have I been told "You must get rid of a lot of stress by hitting those drums!"—and sometimes literally wielded as therapy and intervention for at-risk youths and

the mentally ill. Broader Western ideas about music as a panacea frame such assumptions.⁹ But if taiko wears out the body in certain ways, and if it tears and ruptures our hidden anatomical structures that are most drumlike, then this is the cost: you have to give it your all; its noisy pleasures are earned only at a certain expense.

JAPANESE → JAPANESE AMERICAN PAIN

As I discussed in chapter 5, the Manzanar Pilgrimage was a rare example of taiko players returning to a site of damage and playing through it. Conversely, Japanese culture is famously full of pain, self-denial, and extreme ascetic practices. Writing at length about the bodily enculturation that took place during his Japanese taiko training (specifically through the practices of two groups, Sukeroku and Kodo), Bender (2012, 131–32) argues that disciplining the body is always about specific social orders. Kodo makes apprentice musicians sit *seiza* at meals, in the traditional Japanese position with legs folded under the body, feet tucked under the buttocks, hands resting in the lap. “Even though the pain was intense,” Bender writes, the explanation for this rule was that the practice rid young apprentices’ bodies of the Western habit of sitting in chairs and thus returned them to traditional habits, and indeed they were told that they would “get used to it.” Kodo’s training process attends to all aspects of apprentices’ movement, from opening and closing doors to eating with chopsticks, in order to discipline their bodies into mindful, efficient, and “Japanese” habits; all movements are conceived of as part of the experience of playing taiko. Kodo’s performances enact a body totally dedicated to taiko.

Taiko is an extreme sport, but this will not impress dance scholars, who are deeply familiar with the masochistic imprint left on their entire discipline by ballet. The Balanchine regime may be a specific oddity in a long history of differentiated practices, but it is an extension of ideologies more than a hundred years old. Balanchine’s anorexic, White, North American ballerina has a large presence, given her frailty. The psychologist Jock Abra (1987, 33) writes that ballet is utterly defined by pain, injury, and weariness. But its pain-filled praxis is supposed to be invisible. One could cite many other kinds of performance that memorialize and channel real pain and injury, from Khmer court dance in diaspora to rituals of commemoration at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC. As Judith Hamera (2002, 65) writes, “Dance technique offers more than protocols for reading the body; it is also a technology of subjectivity, a template organizing sociality, and an archive that links subjectivities and socialities to history. As archive, technique contains and organizes the traces and residues dance leaves behind, and out of which it forms again: injuries, vocabulary, relationships.” The bodily techniques of any social practice thus contain and reveal the “sociality” of the community in movement, and the codification of motion in technique is at once history making and history telling.

Injury is especially likely to be woven into choreographic principles. Elaine Scarry (1985, 279) argues that inflicting pain is about unmaking, so she notes that “achieving an understanding of social justice may require that we first come to an understanding of making and unmaking.” Understanding taiko as an Asian American form of making thus requires equal attention to what has been unmade, and a critical engagement with the techniques that disarticulate(d) the body politic.

Karen Shimakawa’s (2002, 4) formulation of Asian American abjection as a spectacle of the US nation is useful here because she opens up the abject as a dynamic, shifting formation central to national identity.¹⁰ Drawing from Kristeva, she argues that the Asian American as repulsive Other is necessary to any sense of the norm, writing, “I utilize *abjection* as a descriptive paradigm in order to posit a way of understanding the relationship linking the psychic, symbolic, legal, and aesthetic dimensions of national identity as they are performed . . . by Asian Americans.” Like Shimakawa, I aim to address “the complex relationship between affective experience and cultural expression in the formation of Asian Americanness,” by interrogating a form whose participants continually deny the place of pain and anger in their motivations while reveling in the marks of pain on their bodies. The specific injury of the World War II incarceration has been the focus of much work in Asian American studies, some of which addresses how it has been carried into later generations. In his memoir, David Mura (1995, 246) records his personal process of coming into political consciousness, noting that “my identity, the most intimate of feelings about my own sexuality, were directly tied to what had happened nearly fifty years ago—the signing of Executive Order No. 9066 and the internment of the Japanese American community.” He ponders his deep-seated anger and abjection:

How does the rage latent in any shame break the surface? When the sources of the rage aren’t identified, the person directs the rage at any number of objects—intimate relationships, chance encounters on the street, daily life. The destruction such unexamined rage can wreak is enormous. . . .

I do not think my parents could admit their rage: it was stamped down in the camps, in the Japanese concept of *gaman*—enduring, preserving; it was muted by their belief that by fitting in, by forgetting their cultural past, by becoming the model minority, they could assimilate. Their rage would have destroyed this belief. . . .

Yet I know the rage was there, shaping their lives, the world of my childhood.
(252–53)

Near the end of this memoir, Mura puts the pieces together in a dramatic act of making: he connects his Nisei parents’ experience of incarceration, their denial of rage and abjection, and its impact on his understanding of masculinity and the right to belong. He calls this complex “the internalized internment camp,” unacknowledged by the Nisei father and understood only belatedly, at great cost, by the Sansei son (261).

My teacher Rev. Tom Kurai came to taiko in the mid-1970s, at the same time when he began to identify with Sansei rage over the incarceration; he was an early member of the Manzanar Committee. A photograph of him and his friend Kenny Endo, both later leading Japanese American taiko teachers, documents their participation in the 1975 Manzanar Pilgrimage (see figure 27, Tom Kurai and Kenny Endo playing taiko at the 1975 Manzanar Pilgrimage, at <http://wonglouderand-faster.com>). This photo captures a turning point in both their lives, when they each turned to taiko as a performative means to simultaneously explore heritage and define themselves as Japanese American. Neither of them had yet “become” a taiko player, but this performance transformed them into just that. Tom was twenty-eight. He and Kenny wanted to contribute something to the pilgrimage, so they pulled out one of the taiko used in Zen Buddhist ritual at Tom’s father’s temple in Los Angeles (in front of Tom on the left) and borrowed a tiny American-made taiko from a friend; the latter didn’t have a stand, so they propped it up on a box (played by Kenny, on the right). They didn’t know how to play any taiko pieces, so they just jammed, and the participants loved it. Bon-odori was by then already reestablished in California Japanese American Buddhist communities, and it was incorporated into the Manzanar Pilgrimage ritual. Taiko and dance were thus central to the rituals of memory and politicization self-consciously created by postwar Japanese Americans, and Rev. Tom’s motivation to learn taiko was inextricably bound up with his political awakening.

As I wrote in the previous chapter, Asian American women articulate, define, explore, and rechannel their anger through taiko, and Japanese American men move between macho display and playfully ironic spectacles of their bodies through taiko. Anger, denial, and the continued effects of racist injury are part of the Asian American experience and are acted out in ways that range from vitriolic performance art to the docility of obedient model minorities. The transpacific circulation of these ideas shapes Asian American taiko players’ attitudes toward the body as a memorial to pain. This body does its work at a crossroads where the panopticon of a racialized society offers certain conditions for spectacularized visibility and presence. From the outside, taiko looks and sounds good: its celebratory color offers a feel-good thrill to any multicultural gathering, where the aim is usually to do nothing more or less than that—to feel good. From within, a good taiko group is generated by the willingness to give oneself over to the group and to play through pain by drawing on nostalgic ideas about selfless bodily denial and wordless suffering. The framing gesture of *gaman*—the key Issei and Nisei value and strategy that enabled survival in the camps—folds into Sansei and Yonsei willingness to play through coordinated pain to assert a joyful presence. *Gaman*, enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity, allows the taiko player to assert *Shikata ga nai*, it can’t be helped.

But that *gaman* is grounded in a dogged insistence on an apolitical taiko, in which heritage is safely celebrated but any explicit reference to anger is rare. The

generative anger over the incarceration has given way to a middle-class contentment, and the core pain of taiko is refashioned as romanticized authenticity rather than a historically specific injury.¹¹ Susan Leigh Foster (2003, 410) reminds us to attend to “the amount and kind of physical labor that goes in to establishing the connection among bodies,” and in this case a huge amount of dedicated work goes into bypassing the pain and citing not it but instead a preincarceration, preimmigration body as a way to reconstitute history.

Must Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans endlessly perform their own degradation? The question is whether the site of trauma can be recuperated by revisiting it in a way that changes how it is remembered and known. The photographer Andrew Freeman documents buildings in the desert towns around Manzanar that are constructed out of barracks removed and recycled from the incarceration camp after it closed in 1946. Some of the contemporary owners—none of them Japanese American—are proud to own a piece of history, to reoccupy history.¹² The repeated thing becomes merely a piece of history.

I go to taiko for its joy. But that joy will not be a form of Asian American cultural production unless we acknowledge that taiko performs a rearticulated body. Scarry argues that the survivor must remake the world shattered by pain, but that pain itself is then one of the first things referenced through language—or as I would say, through performance.¹³ Butler (2004, 18) calls for “hearing beyond what we are able to hear.” We bring the pain back by insisting it’s our strength. Maybe it is. But if the body is “articulate matter” (Foster 2003, 395), then it is discursively able to state only what we are willing to hear, no matter how loud.