

Dancing the Body Politic

Obon and Bon-odori

THE BODY POLITIC

Participating in the huge unison circle dances at Obon gatherings has been my most profound experience as a taiko player, repeated many times every summer at many temples. It's all about dancing, not about playing taiko, though it has taught me as much about taiko as actually playing has. Bon-odori are the dances at the heart of the Obon festival. I haven't played taiko much since 2009, but every summer I go to the Southern California temples to dance. Sometimes I go with friends, especially taiko friends. Sometimes I go alone, because I know I'll see taiko friends there. Really, I just go to dance. No one is alone when dancing bon-odori.

In July 1997, only a few months after I started learning taiko with Rev. Tom, he told the members of my beginning class that we would play a piece for the annual Obon festival at his temple, Sozenji. The day came and we were all nervous. It was my first Obon. In between helping with the bingo game and moving folding chairs, we all kept going over our little piece in our heads and doing air taiko together. Before the outdoor taiko recital, we were told there would be group dances. I figured I would just watch, but no. Audrey Nakasone was busily herding taiko students to and fro, but she had a sixth sense for certain things. She grabbed my arm through my happi coat and said, "Just dance. You have to dance." I said, "But—," and she said, pushing me into the circle, "No. This is important. Everyone should dance, especially taiko players."

Perhaps I have romanticized bon-odori. Certainly, I bring heavy hopes and expectations to it, but the dances carry an explicitly utopian purpose, realized through praxis. You are supposed to dance and thereby to lose your ego. In the act of getting over yourself, you vanish into the messy, unwieldy, colorful, beautiful, awkward totality of the crowds that dance together. You become the body politic because you are part of it. Community and self are collapsed. Hundreds of people dance at the Southern California Obon festivals, mostly Japanese Americans. A few

of the temples have small gatherings, but most have huge gatherings, especially the fifteen Jodo Shinshu temples linked in the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). Sometimes a thousand people dance together; minimally, three to five hundred. Community is not abstract in this environment. The sight of hundreds upon hundreds of people making the same movements is powerful—even more so, feeling one's own movements amplified through hundreds of other bodies.

Bon means Obon. It comes from the Ullambana—"Urabon" in Japanese—Sutra, which tells the story of a monk who danced for joy when he released his deceased mother's soul from hell by making merit (a force accumulated through good deeds) for her. Most Japanese American Buddhists say that Obon is the annual ritual when the living should remember the dead. The dance scholar Judy Van Zile (1982, 1) writes, "O-Bon is usually translated into English as the Festival of Souls, the Feast of the Dead, or the Festival of Lanterns. Traditional belief maintains that the souls of the departed return to earth to be with the living during O-Bon. Thus, although the occasion honors the dead—what might be considered a sad occasion in Western cultures—it is a joyous event celebrating the temporary return of souls and happiness at their achieving a higher state of being." Rev. Masao Kodani (1999, 9) observes that Obon is also called "Kangi-e, or the Gathering of Joy . . . meaning the Joy in the Dharma or the Joy in the Truth of Life and Death. It is thus a gathering of joy which embraces all things, living and dead—a memorial service of joy." Rev. Patti Usuki of West Los Angeles Buddhist Temple has written that Obon "is not, as some mistakenly believe, to welcome back the spirits of the dead. Instead, it is a time of gratitude, giving, and joy in the Truth of Life. Hence, it is also known as Kangi-e, or the Gathering of Joy." She also notes that bon-odori may have "evolved from the Nembutsu Odori of dancers who played instruments while chanting 'Namo Amida Butsu'—I take refuge in Infinite Light and Life, Immeasurable Wisdom and Compassion—symbolized by Amida Buddha."¹ In Japan, Obon takes place at the same time all over the country, from the thirteenth to the seventeenth day of the seventh month (July or August). Many people return to their families then, so the train lines spill over with travelers. In Japanese American practice in California, Obon extends over a two-month period, since temples take turns celebrating it, to maximize cross-temple attendance. The effect is an extended, sustained period of celebration, as well as hard work for the host temples.

Odori means "dance," and bon-odori are thus the dances for Obon.² Sojin Kim (2014) writes that dancing bon-odori is about "remembering the ancestors, appreciating past and present relationships, enjoying the moment, and acknowledging the impermanence of life." In the early afternoon, the host temple holds Hatsubon, the "first Obon," a Buddhist service that marks the first anniversary after a death and is attended by those who experienced loss during the preceding year. Most Jodo Shinshu temples in California celebrate Obon as a one- or two-day event that combines a carnival fundraiser with Hatsubon and bon-odori. The rituals of Hatsubon and bon-odori are thus surrounded by food and booths, cultural exhibits

and demonstrations (of, e.g., ikebana and martial arts), a yard sale of donated secondhand household items, stage performances (of taiko, *enka*, etc.), bingo, and a farmers' market of seasonal fruits, vegetables, and potted plants. This often constitutes the most significant fundraising of the year, and temple members put a huge amount of work into planning Obon. Food preparation alone takes weeks of organization and then long days of work just before the festival. I once spent eight hours in the afternoon and evening before Obon in the kitchen of my teacher Rev. Tom Kurai's mother, filling and folding wontons so they would be ready for deep-frying the next day.

In Southern California the dances take place in the early summer evening, often from 6:30 to 8:30 PM. They are always held outside, since it virtually never rains during the summer in Southern California. Most temples stage the dances in their parking lot or in an adjacent street blocked off to traffic. Ahead of time, as part of the temple's extensive preparations for the Obon festival, congregation members sweep the area and spray-paint white lines on the asphalt—huge concentric circles, at least two and up to four if the area is large enough. A tall wood tower called a *yagura* is erected in the center, at least six feet off the ground and sometimes much higher. *Yagura* were originally watchtowers or turrets in castle or fortress walls, and they have historical connotations of keeping watch, though this isn't their feeling in bon-odori. In Obon, a *yagura* is a ritual band stage: a small platform at the top, about ten by ten feet and sometimes smaller, is accessed by climbing a ladder. The platform is empty except for a *chudaiko*. Volunteers spend hours stringing lines of electric lights from the *yagura* to the perimeter of the dance circles—like spokes in a wheel—and hanging paper lanterns from them. Temple members can make donations to have a deceased family member's name attached to a lantern, often in the shape of a dangling rectangle of paper that flutters in the breeze. Bon-odori begins with a brief Buddhist service led by the resident ministers, who often climb up into the *yagura* and say a few words through the PA system while the dancers stand waiting, lined up on the white stripes.

I love how bon-odori shapes certain corners of Los Angeles. At Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple in Little Tokyo, the white lines for the circles are painted on the parking lot asphalt (see figure 10, the parking lot at Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, looking toward the temple, and figure 11, the same parking lot, looking out toward Vignes Street, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). You could say that the space—which otherwise looks like just another parking lot—is in a perpetual state of readiness for the dances. The circles wait to be populated with the choreography of the community.

Every year, the lead dance teachers in the region choose eight dances for the season. About six other dances are perennial favorites and are always featured, such as “Tanko Bushi” (discussed below), “Tokyo Ondo,” “One Plus One,” “Shiawase Samba,” and the dance that begins and ends the event, “Bon-Odori Uta,” to which I will return. The dancing starts when the sun is low and the shadows

are long. The dances are performed in succession, one after the other, all the way through, with a break in the middle when everyone runs off to buy *dango* (Okinawan doughnut holes) or shave ice, or to redeem the drink ticket given to each dancer in thanks for their participation (see figure 12, the author's drink ticket from Obon at Hompa Hongwanji Betsuin, Los Angeles, July 2015, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). By the last few dances, the sun has set, the lanterns glow in the dusk, and the area looks magical.

The Obon schedule in Southern California is extremely organized, thanks to the structure of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism in the US. The BCA's Southern District has fifteen temples, across California's Central Coast, the Central Valley, greater Los Angeles, and Arizona. The Southern District Dharma School Teachers' League (SDDSTL) coordinates the annual dance set for all the Obon festivals in the Southern District, making it possible for dancers to participate fully in Obon at one another's temples. Indeed, the entire idea is to create a fixed schedule of Obon so temples aren't competing against one another.³ Between the third week of June and the first week of August, no more than two or three temples hold their annual Obon on any given weekend. The larger temples host the festival over two days, Saturday and Sunday, with bon-odori on both evenings; smaller temples offer only a single day of festivities and dancing. Some people attend only the Obon festival at their own temple; many go to at least several others. Taiko players seek out as many as possible because kumi-daiko performances are almost always given in the hour or two before bon-odori, featuring the resident taiko group if there is one and often one or two other invited groups.

GETTING READY TO DANCE

In 2015, Obon was the main focus of my summer, for both research and pleasure, so I faithfully attended the dance practices at Nishi Hongwanji. My aim was to finally learn the dances so I wouldn't (as I always told myself) spend yet another summer stumbling through them. To my surprise, the practices at Nishi began only a week before the late-June start of the SoCal Obon festivals. Somehow I had pictured classes that went on for months, carefully leading the attendees into the dances move by move. Instead, the sessions were truly practice, not class, open to any and all but implicitly directed toward participants with some degree of bon-odori experience.

We met in the parking lot, in the actual space where the bon-odori would take place. The teacher, Elaine Fukumoto, was outfitted with a wireless mic; she stood in the center of our circles, near the platform that would be transformed into a *yagura* during the two days of the festival. She quickly reviewed the moves before each dance by walking through them, and then we went right into it: the music started and we were off. I (along with some others) had not memorized the moves from Elaine's brief demo, so I kept my eyes fixed on the inner circle of about six

advanced dancers. The session took place in such a large space that I consistently wasted time trying to figure out who I could follow most effectively without having to look over my shoulder, which inevitably flummoxed me with left-right orientation problems. Finally, I began to trust in whoever was in my line of sight. The practice was truly that: running the dances one by one in a full ninety-minute session with a short break in the middle—pretty much exactly what a “real” bon-odori session is like, and with the exact same recordings played. It worked—or at least it worked well enough for me. After three practice sessions (Tuesday, Thursday, and again the following Tuesday), the dances that at first seemed utterly mysterious and difficult were becoming familiar, even if I was still just getting it at about the time when the recording ended and the dance was over. (See figure 13, T-shirt sold by Venice Hongwanji Buddhist Temple to fund the Venice Fujinkai Buddhist Women’s Association, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>, for evidence that I was not alone in my struggles to learn the dances.)

The dances I already knew were a complete pleasure: “Bon-Odori Uta,” “Bambutsu no Tsunagari,” “One Plus One,” “Shiawase Samba,” and of course “Tanko Bushi.” I finally got comfortable with “Ei Ja Nai Ka,” PJ Hirabayashi’s composition and choreography. When dancing “Bambutsu” in the third practice session, I felt the joy and emplacement that come with moving without thinking, as if I were part of a much bigger whole.

Curiously, the practice sessions weren’t particularly social. I had imagined people hanging out and talking about the dances, but most participants were intent, focused, and matter of fact. Many were middle-aged women; most came with at least one other person—a friend or family member—with whom they kept to themselves. About forty people were present, all Japanese American or Asian American except for one White man. During the break I chatted with people, often starting with an acquaintance or a nearby stranger, but I found that I was virtually always the initiator when talking with strangers. People were friendly but distant. I thought that everyone would already know one another as members of the temple, but some participants were outsiders to Nishi, who came strictly to practice the dances. I didn’t feel at all awkward or out of place, since many people didn’t seem acquainted, but it wasn’t the bustling space of enthusiastic love for bon-odori that I had expected. Instead, the participants’ quiet focus and choreographic purpose bore out their commitment. They were there to get the dances down so they could move with grace and confidence at the events to come.

I have been dancing bon-odori since 1997 but am an interloper and an amateur. For years I showed up at Obon festivals in sneakers and informal summer clothing and relied on borrowed fans (*uchiwa*), since the temples always have a box of them available for those dances (you take one for one dance and then immediately return it to the box before the next dance). Sometimes I remembered to wear a *tenugui*, a thin cotton towel knotted around the neck like a bandanna, ready to use it in the appropriate dances. I own three *tenugui*. One was a present from a

Japanese friend, and another is a plain length of white cotton covered with sponsors' names from an Obon at Zenshuji Buddhist Temple that I bought for five dollars. I bought the third in Nishi's bookstore in July 2015: it was the last one, so the clerk kindly discounted it from ten to four dollars.

On June 27, 2015, at Senshin Buddhist Temple's Obon, the first L.A.-area festival of the season, I ran into Rip Rense and Annie Chuck, two friends of mine to whom I'll return below. They are avid bon-odori dancers: they go to Obon virtually every weekend during the summer months. I complimented them on their clothing. They both looked terrific—informal but put together, with colorful happi coats and polka-dot tenugui (see figure 14, Annie Chuck and Rip Rense at Senshin Buddhist Temple's Obon, June 27, 2015, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). Annie had her tenugui around her neck, and Rip had twisted his into a hachimaki. I was suddenly envious. Without really thinking about it, I had assumed that you got dressed up only if you were a temple member and therefore wore a happi coat emblazoned with your temple's name and logo—basically for home-team pride. Many women and a few men, mostly Japanese Americans, wore *yukata*—colorful cotton summer robes like kimonos but decidedly informal. I've worn yukata when staying at Japanese hotels and guesthouses (*ryokan*), but I can't imagine wearing one in public, let alone dancing in one. I fingered Annie's lovely happi coat, which was obviously her own personal clothing—it had no temple name or crest on it. As far as I was concerned, wearing Japanese clothing was a measure of Annie and Rip's seriousness about bon-odori and Jodo Shinshu, and their clothes were not the kind of japonaiserie I address elsewhere in this book. Seeing my envy, Annie suddenly said, "You should dress up!" I found myself eyeing dancers' clothing in a different way after that. Though most participants at the Nishi practices dressed informally (T-shirts, jeans, shorts, sneakers), some middle-aged Japanese American women there wore simple Japanese indigo wrap-front jackets. By the third session, I was emboldened enough to ask one woman where she had gotten hers—I immediately liked its understated *sashiko* (white cotton embroidery) patterns. She said she had gotten it at the Uyeda Department Store, on East First Street, just four blocks away.

Step by step, I was entering a deeper level of intent. I started bringing my own fan, which was by no means an elegant uchiwa but had a lot of personal meaning because it was a souvenir from a trip to Japan with Rev. Tom and Satori Daiko in 2006 (see figure 15, the author's dance fan (*uchiwa*) from a trip to Japan with Satori Daiko, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). At Senshin's 2015 Obon, I asked a woman where she had gotten her *kachi kachi* (bamboo castanets), and to my surprise she pointed to the rear of the temple and said, "Right there—in the temple bookstore!" I went straight over and spent fifteen minutes with a Japanese American volunteer clerk, who showed me some eight sets in three sizes (small, medium, and large). "A temple member made them," she said, and I put two and two together. "Was it George Abe?" I asked, naming the well-known taiko and

shakuhachi (Japanese bamboo flute) player who was a founding member of Kin-nara Taiko and Senshin Buddhist Temple. “Yes!” she said. I bought a large pair for thirty dollars and now bring them to every bon-odori practice session and Obon gathering (see figure 16, the author’s *kachi kachi*, made by George Abe and bought at Senshin Buddhist Temple, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). Whenever I attend an Obon, ready to dance, I wear a small backpack to keep my fan and *kachi kachi* with me; my *tenugui* is around my neck. I wear a bright red happi coat I bought at the Uyeda Department Store.⁴ I’m starting to think of myself as a bon-odori dancer.

MAKING A BUDDHIST TRADITION

As Sojin Kim (2014) puts it, “Each weekend, upon the asphalt of temple parking lots across Southern California, lined up in concentric circles and trying to stay within the lanes spray painted on the ground, the dancers move more or less in time with the music. . . . Swaying their arms and stepping to the beat of the taiko, keeping the circles in motion, they reinforce the connections between the past and present, among the people participating, and to a sense of place—all this by just dancing.” Like taiko, bon-odori is often talked about and affectively experienced as if it were very old, but the Southern California tradition is in fact not old at all.⁵ As Linda Cummings Akiyama (1989, 96–97) has painstakingly researched, the dances were introduced and established in the 1930s by an immigrant Jodo Shinshu minister, Rev. Yoshio Iwanaga, and his Nisei musician wife, Chizu Helen Iwanaga (a pioneer in Japanese American Buddhist music). At that point, Obon was not a regular or prominent observance in California’s Jodo Shinshu temples; after deaths, memorial services were held at the proper time and were mostly attended by Issei. Rev. Iwanaga came to the US specifically to teach Buddhist music (*doyo buyo*) and bon-odori to Buddhist Nisei youth. Invited to California by a Buddhist minister who was already focused on work with youth, he was automatically connected to the network of Jodo Shinshu temples. The first bon-odori on the mainland was held “in the auditorium of the San Francisco Buddhist Temple in 1931” (Kodani 1999, 9), and by 1936 that city’s bon-odori had become so large that it was held outside, on Buchanan Street in Japantown. He taught *doyo buyo* first at the Stockton Buddhist Temple in the Central Valley and then at the temples in San Francisco and San Jose. From 1931 to 1933, Rev. Iwanaga worked out of Nishi Hongwanji in Los Angeles and was invited to teach bon-odori at many temples up and down the length of California. He was later assigned to the Stockton temple for a time and then to the one in Watsonville.

In the 1930s and 1940s, most of the Issei had been in the US for only two, three, or at most four decades, and many were originally from the central and southern parts of Japan. Rev. Iwanaga carefully arranged and introduced dances from those regions and then spent years simplifying and rechoreographing them. He also

created entirely new dances, built from a vocabulary of folk-dance movements and set to Japanese recordings. Interviewed many years later (in 1988), his widow, Helen Iwanaga, described his process as creative. Akiyama (1989, 69) writes, “He would often take a basic Japanese dance movement and then do an improvisation from it . . . , adding a curved path of an arm gesture, a body tilt, or a step pattern. If he wasn’t completely satisfied with a section of his choreography, he would have his wife repeat the phrase on the piano, over and over until he felt the choreography was the way that he wanted it.” Akiyama argues that Rev. Iwanaga used “school-taught *minyō*,” or the *minyō* (folk music) arranged and taught in the Japanese public school system in the 1920s and 1930s (118). That is, he transmitted a tradition of revised and mediated rural materials rather than unadulterated Japanese folklore. The parallels with late twentieth- and early twentieth-first-century *kumi-daiko* are obvious and suggest dynamic, long-term processes of shaping and reshaping Japanese expressive practices.

Rev. Iwanaga’s dances are still in the Southern California *bon-odori* repertoire, but they are not part of a self-consciously stable tradition. Rev. Masao Kodani, the longtime minister at Senshin Buddhist Temple, has written extensively about *Obon*, *bon-odori*, and *taiko* as *horaku*, or Buddhist practice. As one of the founders of *Kinnara Taiko* (established in 1969), Rev. Mas (as he is known) is widely regarded within the North American *taiko* community as a knowledgeable and principled community-based practitioner-scholar. Over some fifty years he has generated an impressive amount of writing and a corpus of primary materials including documentaries and instructional films.

Bon-odori is a very old ritual practice but has been continuously reconstituted. For centuries in Japan it was associated with the rural labor class and was participatory, with no professional dancers. Rev. Kodani (2009) writes that it was banned in Japan from approximately the 1860s to around 1912—that is, from the early Meiji era to the early Taisho era (1912–25); he notes that the Meiji government felt *bon-odori* “encouraged licentious behaviors,” whereas the Taisho government lifted the ban as part of a national return to “an emphasis on what it meant to be Japanese.” He also observes that the years immediately following the lifting of the ban featured a surge in creative activity focused on *bon-odori*, “especially in the cities, where new, more western-influenced *Bon-odori* was created.” Akiyama (1989, 110) describes the Taisho era as “a period of intellectual and artistic freedom,” when *Obon* festivals became popular again and were held in towns and cities rather than just the rural countryside.

I draw extensively on Rev. Kodani’s thinking and writing about *bon-odori* not only because he has thought so deeply about it over some five decades but also because his approach to it has influenced many Japanese American Buddhists in Southern California and beyond. His *Sansei* sensibilities are often evident in his unapologetic focus on Japanese American community maintenance. He became a minister at Senshin Buddhist Temple in 1968 and served as its head minister from

1978 to 2013; he was a founder and longtime member of Kinnara Taiko. He and Nobuko Miyamoto—the legendary activist and musician mentioned in the introduction—have collaborated on seven contemporary bon-odori songs/dances,⁶ so he has intentionally contributed to the tradition of Japanese American (rather than Japanese) bon-odori with focus and thought. He was also a key writer and generating force for the booklet and CD *Gathering of Joy*, a compendium of Japanese American bon-odori songs (Kodani 1999).

Over the years, Rev. Mas has written repeatedly about Obon and bon-odori in the monthly newsletter sent to members of Senshin Buddhist Temple. (See figure 17, page from Senshin Buddhist Temple's monthly newsletter, at <http://wonglounderandfaster.com>.) His list of values and directives was published in the newsletter in June 2012 (Kodani 2012) and is worth reading in its entirety. Rev. Mas's thinking is deeply informed by the Japanese American experience and by Jodo Shinshu Buddhism. The radical egalitarianism that marks Kinnara Taiko as a group is largely the result of Rev. Mas's commitment to the principles of Jodo Shinshu, which shift spiritual emphasis away from monks and toward everyday practitioners. He has written that the Jodo Shinshu sangha is therefore not its community of monks but rather the "fellow-travelers in the Dharma," or all practicing Buddhists, especially the laity (Kodani 2010b); he consistently refers to Senshin members (who might be called, in Christian terminology, the temple's congregation) as "the Senshin Sangha." His principle of *tada odore*, "just dance," is well known in the Southern California Japanese American Buddhist community.

Rev. Mas (Kodani 2010a) notes that Senshin is unusual because, from its founding in the 1950s, it separated the fundraising carnival from bon-odori and in the 1970s stopped holding the carnival entirely. Since then, the bon-odori at Senshin has focused on dancing alone, with generally only a single booth, selling drinks for thirsty dancers. As Rev. Mas has written, "If you came to Senshinji's *Bon-odori*, you came to dance, and if you came and watched, you were urged, sometimes taunted, to dance by the dancers."

His list of fourteen things that "Bon Odori in America is not" (Kodani 2012) is thus both typical and unique. Without question, Rev. Mas has put his personal philosophy of Obon and bon-odori into words in a way that few other Japanese American Buddhists have. This is not to say that the huge community's Buddhist and non-Buddhist practitioners don't have equally deep and thoughtful understandings of what the dances mean, but most express this through practice rather than words. In my experience, those who choose to dance would generally agree with most of Rev. Mas's assertions, though they might also learn new things from his list.

The state of mind—or the mind-heart-body-soul oneness posited by Buddhism—generated by participation in bon-odori is profound. It is worth quoting Rev. Mas (Kodani 2010a) at length on this point because he articulates communal understandings in a way that draws them into sharper relief:

The essential thing was to dance, not showing off, not being embarrassed, but to forget the self long enough to “just dance”, and in that moment of just dancing to suddenly remember and sense a deep connection to our deceased loved ones and, on a deeper level, to all things living and dead. It is a “*tarik*i-like moment” where everything is perfect and in its harmonious place. And when you come out of that moment, everything old becomes suddenly new, it has a new vibrancy that is seen individually and communally. Bon Odori is after all and at long last—not just a summer festival to eat, drink, be merry, and make a few bucks—it is a religious event celebrated by a religious community by members living and dead.

Rev. Mas focuses here on the individual experience of dancing bon-odori with others. It is remarkably like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of flow—that ideal state of complete absorption in an activity, when time and your ego fall away—and of course this is no coincidence, since many ritual/performance acts are meant to create just such a collapse of distinctions between self and other, then and now, here and there. *Tariki* is a Japanese Pure Land Buddhist concept usually translated as “other-power,” meaning the power of the Amitabha Buddha; it is the opposite of the “self-power” (*jiriki*) which is the useless arrogance of the human condition.

I hasten to add that bon-odori is not at all mystified. Practice sessions are offered annually at many temples for a few weeks, held at least once if not twice a week in the temple auditorium, leading up to the beginning of the Obon season in late June. Anyone who wants to attend these free sessions is welcome. Many of the most focused and serious attendees are older women, mostly Japanese American, who are the kind of dancers you want to be near if you aren’t sure of the steps, because they know the dances inside and out. They are as prepared as one can be: they have their own uchiwa and kachi kachi, they wear matching temple happi coats, and they dance together at any Obon. In 2016, many wore matching LED-lit plastic rings on their fingers, so their hands created a wave of bright, blinking light as they danced. They look good in every possible way. They exemplify the Japanese value placed on doing things correctly.

Bon-odori is instantly metaphorical. The dancers are and aren’t in unison—a perfect metonym for the Japanese American Buddhist community. The key principle is simple: everyone is dancing the same steps and moving in the same direction (usually counterclockwise). That unison is beautiful to see as hundreds of arms rise together in waves or as hundreds of bodies take a step toward the yagura together, making the great circle suddenly contract, and then step back outward, making it expand again. Still, the unison movements are full of differences, despite some of the dance teachers’ hope for sameness. Differences—some subtle and others glaring—mark (some might say mar) the dancers’ movements. Rip and Annie, respectively a White American Buddhist and a Chinese American Buddhist, are a couple who dance in virtually all the Obon festivals in Southern California, as mentioned above; they are true bon-odori devotees. As members of West Los

Angeles Buddhist Temple, they wrote a short essay, “Why We Dance at Obon” (Rense and Chuck 2006), in which they describe “the variety of dance styles on display: the robust, flamboyant and sometimes free form stylings of some of the men; the economic grace of the ladies; the classical flourishes of some of the more serious students; the exuberance of the young people; the confused steps of the little kids. They are all beautiful.” I couldn’t describe it better. These participatory discrepancies are the life of the tradition.

TAIKO AND BON-ODORI

Bon drumming is notoriously different from the kumi-daiko that reigns supreme at this historical moment. *Bon daiko* is accompaniment, whether to bon dancers or to a minyo group of singers and perhaps a few other instruments (shamisen, etc.). In North America, the clear majority of bon drummers are men; a few women are now featured, as I will explain, but for now I will refer to the drummer as *he*.⁷ He stands far up above the dancers and indeed everyone else, alone on the *yagura*. He wears a happi coat and hachimaki; he usually plays a *chudaiko*. He plays very sparingly, just accenting the main rhythms of the dance, with a relaxed minimalism. He stands not in formal *kata* but often in a flat-footed, casual stance. His moves are unfussy and understated. He is literally the heartbeat of the dance.

I just realized that I’m describing George Abe—not a generic bon drummer—since I have mostly seen *him* play bon daiko over the years (see figure 18, George Abe playing *bon daiko* at Higashi Hongwanji on the *yagura*, at <http://wonglou-derandfaster.com>). Abe is the preeminent bon drummer in Southern California. He is invited to play at any number of Obon dances—not all of them, but many of the main ones, including, of course, Senshin’s, plus those of Higashi Honganji and many others. Rev. Mas remembered the bon drummer at Senshin during his youth: “It was a man named Mr. Inouye who . . . my prejudice is he’s the only decent *Bon-odori* taiko player that I’ve ever come across. But he used to play as a kid and so he played really well. . . . He was here and George is his successor. George played with him year after year and got the hang of it and so he’s probably our best *Bon-odori* taiko player.” For Rev. Mas (Kodani 2004, 29–30),

Bon-odori taiko is really hard because it’s not supposed to be heard. It backs up the music and the dancers, so it’s not “listen to this” kind of performance, whereas taiko is. It’s stage taiko. But *Bon-odori* taiko is this kind of heartbeat that’s supposed to support the dancers and to do that, you have to know the dance and the music and not be . . . “check this out,” you know. So in that sense, it’s very hard. And the worst players of *Bon-odori* taiko are taiko players because they’re the exact opposite—“check this out!” you know. So it’s the exact opposite.

The Southern California bon drummers whom I have seen since 1997 play along with the recordings that are the main soundtrack for bon-odori—that is, not with

live musicians.⁸ Rev. Iwanaga sometimes played taiko to accompany his bon-odori dancers, and Akiyama (1989, 32) notes that he too played along with recorded music. The Japanese American bon-odori as known today is largely the creative legacy of Rev. Iwanaga, and since 1930 it has evidently meant dancing to the sound of commercially recorded songs and a live bon drummer who follows the recording. The recordings are distinctive: their sound is quintessentially part of the bon-odori soundscape. Many Sansei dancers have told me that they remember scratchy old LPs played at their postwar childhood bon-odori, followed in the 1970s by dubbed cassette recordings that grew distorted and wobbly as the years passed. The decidedly imperfect and lo-fi sound of the songs was part of their charm and acquired a nostalgic sheen over time. By and large, the same commercial recordings were used over and over, because dancers were used to them. Virtually all were from Japan and featured Japanese musicians singing in Japanese.⁹

The system for distributing the fifteen or sixteen songs and dances selected for the season is impressive, effective, and part of an informal Japanese American dissemination structure. Given the DIY ease of assembling digital materials, the songs are compiled on uncopyrighted compact discs and sold for a minimal amount by the BCA Bookstore.¹⁰ For instance, one CD in my collection was clearly homemade, with a label saying “2014 SDDSTL OBON SONGS.” The fifteen song titles were listed on the CD’s face, and the CD’s plastic case was completely unadorned except for a simple adhesive label on the back also listing the titles. Likewise, an annual instructional DVD is often made so everyone in Southern California can learn the same dances. Over the years it has become increasingly professional, featuring narrated, step-by-step footage of each dance performed by a couple, to show male and female movement styles, as well as front and back views. One can also watch the two dancers perform each dance all the way through without stopping, to the recorded music. Like the CDs, these DVDs are available through the BCA and are widely disseminated by the temple dance teachers, who make it available during the weeks of dance practices in the late spring to anyone interested.

Kumi-daiko is not at all the same as bon drumming, nor is bon drumming generally taught in Southern California kumi-daiko classes. At the Nishi Hongwanji Obon festivals in July 2014, 2015, and 2016, each bon dance featured one of six to eight young drummers, all in their teens; the emcee announced their names. Most emulated the spare rhythms that Abe has made familiar. None had his relaxed weightiness—not yet. The taiko teacher and SDDSTL lead dance teacher Elaine Fukumoto, long associated with Nishi Hongwanji as its kindergarten teacher and much more, told me that she had witnessed a long procession of bon daiko training at the temple over the years. Since the Nishi Hongwanji Obon is the biggest in Southern California—up to a thousand people routinely participate in its bon-odori over two nights—it makes sense that this temple would address the need for good bon daiko. Elaine said she vaguely remembered an older man playing bon daiko on the yagura decades ago, but when he stopped, others tried to learn

without success. In the 1990s, the temple member Rick Taketomo (who played with Kinnara in its early years) taught the dharma school students bon daiko on a volunteer basis. He would start in February and work with some fifteen youths. He did this for many years, with the youths taking turns drumming for bon-odori, but many people quietly felt that their playing didn't have quite the right feeling and was even a bit robotic. Elaine then stepped in herself; as she wrote to me, "I then took the bon daiko on myself with a couple of other people. I had Rev. Mas's philosophy in mind and did a lot of 'research' online. I played for a couple of years, bringing in some guest players like George Abe. [But] it interfered with my opportunities to dance." She said nothing about gender, but this was significant: I know of only a few women who play bon daiko. Rev. Hiroshi Abiko, a taiko player himself, sometimes played bon daiko, taking turns with some of the older youths. When he retired, Yuki Inoue, a coleader of L.A. Matsuri Taiko, a friend of Elaine's, and a Nishi Hongwanji member, volunteered to teach bon daiko to the dharma school youths. At Elaine's request, Inoue asked Abe for guidance and then began teaching. The youths I saw on the yagura in 2014, 2015, and 2016 were the result of this long process. Yuki told me that most of her pupils weren't musicians or even kumi-daiko players but rather dharma students recruited to ensure youth participation. She laughingly admitted that they were neither terribly good nor committed to the project until they actually accompanied live bon-odori: she said rehearsals were sometimes musically chaotic as they played along with the recordings but that things tended to come together at the event. One of Yuki's students, a teenage girl, told me at a bon-odori practice session in 2015 that it was her second summer playing bon daiko and that she hadn't really "gotten it" last year but was now excited about participating in such a central way.¹¹

In sum, bon daiko is profoundly different from kumi-daiko, and kumi-daiko players may exhibit exactly the wrong approach to it . . . but some Japanese American community leaders now teach a handful of young kumi-daiko players how to do it. Most kumi-daiko players know nothing about bon daiko; those who do know that it is a deep corner of taiko which few get to enter, though it isn't clear why bon daiko is so difficult. No one refers to it as ritual drumming, but quite clearly that is what it is. It has been played to scratchy and distorted recordings of Japanese popular songs since the 1930s. It disappears into the exuberance of the crowds and the tumult of the recorded music. When you dance, you feel the drumming as much as you hear it. Few spend much time looking at the bon daiko player despite his—or her—prominent place at the center of the circle, high above the dancers.

RUPTURES

Without question, Japanese American bon-odori is the result of a series of ruptures. It did not emerge out of the mists of time, though in some ways it is a very

old practice. While Obon is observed without bon-odori in some parts of Japan, many Japanese villages and small towns have a folk dance associated with it. When Rev. Tom Kurai took members of Satori Daiko on a study tour of Japan in 2003, for instance, we attended Obon in Tsubetsu, a small town in Hokkaido, where we participated in a long, mesmerizing evening when townspeople danced the same bon dance over and over, for hours (see video 8, *bon-odori* in Tsubetsu, Hokkaido, 2003, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>).

In Japan, bon-odori traditions first appear in the historical record in the fifteenth century and were widespread and popular by the seventeenth-century Tokugawa period (Kodani 1999, 7). By and large, though, the Issei did not transport a rich tradition of bon-odori to North America: the practice was interrupted during the Meiji era. Rev. Kodani writes,

In the Meiji Period (1868–1912) the Bon Odori was banned as it was thought to encourage immoral behavior, especially among the unmarried young who were permitted to fraternize unchaperoned during the period of the Bon Odori. The ban came at a time when the Meiji government was desirous of showing the western world that it was as civilized and advanced as any country in Europe, albeit basing that definition of civilized on western standards. It was a period of intensive copying of western clothes, habits, and mores.

An inordinate number of babies were in fact born nine months after the Bon Odori during the Tokugawa period and the Japanese designation of October as the wedding month may possibly derive from the necessity for an expedient marriage before pregnancy became too obvious. Because of the ban however, much of Bon Odori music and dance was lost. (8)

Akiyama (1989, 126) notes that in the 1930s, Rev. Iwanaga worked with temple ministers and lay leaders to ensure that bon-odori was explicitly defined and experienced as Buddhist practice, choreographing a procession of bon-odori dancers being led into the dance circle by the temple ministers, who wore their formal Buddhist robes. As she explains, “One minister would then lead everyone—dancers and audience—in *gassho*, a gesture of gratitude, and the reciting of the *Nembutsu*, repeating the name of Amida Buddha. After the *Nembutsu*, the dancing would begin.”

Jo Anne Combs (1979, 1985) and Minako Waseda (2000, 116) have documented the so-called “*ondo* craze” or “*ondo* boom” of the 1930s in Japan and “the great popularity of newly composed, commercial *ondo* songs,” used to accompany “the street *ondo* dance.” Waseda notes that record companies routinely released *ondo* (Japanese folk music) songs in competition with one another and that choreographic instructions, often featuring little stick figures, were included with the records. Many *ondo* songs were immediately exported to the US, so the transpacific circulation of materials between Japanese and Nikkei audiences was extensive. Waseda also found that a few Japanese American recording companies commissioned new *ondo*, including “*Rafu Ondo*” in 1935, named for *Rafu Shimpo*,

the leading Japanese American newspaper, based in Los Angeles, and “America Ondo” (118–20).¹²

Rev. Iwanaga was visiting Japan in 1934 (and took lessons in *nihon buyo*, classical Japanese dance, during that stay) when “Tokyo Ondo” became a hit, and he immediately choreographed it for bon-odori when he returned to California. “Tokyo Ondo” is still a standard today at most Southern California bon-odori: it is often included in the set even if it was not rehearsed as part of that season’s dances. It was a secular dance sensation in Japan *and* California in 1934 and became a Japanese American bon-odori song and dance that same year through Rev. Iwanaga’s efforts. The craze swept both sides of the Pacific. Combs (1985, 143) notes that “Tokyo Ondo” was performed in 1934 at a Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) fundraiser in San Diego and at various wedding receptions, disseminated to Southern California Japanese American communities almost immediately as popular culture and as ritualized secular dance.

During World War II, bon-odori was such a fraught spectacle of Japaneseness that it had to be managed in any number of ways. Japanese Americans self-policed their public presence. Lon Kurashige (2002, 68) mentions that in 1941, only several months before the Pearl Harbor attack, the official costumes worn by ondo dancers in the Los Angeles Nisei Week parade were made from cotton, to honor the boycott of Japanese silk, while *Rafu Shimpo* recommended that no Japanese clothing whatsoever be worn in public, to prevent confusion over American loyalty. Emily Roxworthy (2008, 132) muses that assumptions about “racial performativity” deeply shaped that last preinternment Nisei Week ondo, forcing its participants to “dance for their citizenship and freedom” in barely concealed ways. Pearl Harbor realized their worst fears.

From 1942 to 1945, Obon and bon-odori were held in most of the internment camps.¹³ Rev. Iwanaga, his family, and his Watsonville congregation were confined first in the Salinas Assembly Center and then in Poston War Relocation Camp II in Arizona. I have found no photographs of the Poston Obon, but the camp newspaper attests to its celebration, and I wonder whether Rev. Iwanaga organized the bon-odori there. Striking photographs document bon-odori at several of the other camps. Bill Manbo’s 1943–44 photographs of bon-odori at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming are gorgeous (see Manbo and Muller 2012). Startlingly, they are in color—they were shot with Kodachrome—and their soft pastel hues are hauntingly vibrant compared to the black and white of the famous camp photos taken by professional photographers like Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, and Toyo Miyatake. The careful composition (and even staging) of images by War Relocation Authority (WRA) photographers is now well established (Creef 2004). Manbo was interned along with his wife, their young son, and his wife’s parents, and he took photographs as a hobby. His photos of the bon-odori are lovely: most offer close views of young women dancing. In one, most of the women wear a kimono with obi and zori with white tabi; a few wear sneakers or oxfords with

their kimono. Spectators surround the bon-odori circle, especially young men in Western clothes (T-shirts, jeans, cardigans, etc.; see Alinder 2012, 90). One shot shows a small, informal circle of teenage girls, all in kimonos, smiling and chatting with one another (Manbo and Muller 2012, 54). Another was taken from just outside the outermost of two concentric bon-odori circles (Manbo and Muller 2012, 60). Two young men in yukata, with tenugui around their necks, blurrily unfocused, were caught as they clapped. The camera was focused on the inner circle of dancers and a simple yagura about six feet high. Its small stage is empty—no performers, no instruments, no taiko. A wide ladder gaily decorated with red bunting is propped against it. Lengths of rope sporting triangular pennants of different colors emanate from the yagura. A white line in the sand marks the inner dance circle. Teenagers and small girls dance on the line, mostly in bright kimonos (red, pink, blue), though three young girls standing together wear American dresses and bobby socks. The yagura is surrounded by a bench, and the eye is drawn to the men who sit on it: they appear middle-aged and are all formally attired in white shirts, several wearing ties, several others wearing suit jackets, several wearing Panama hats. Are they Issei men, sitting in a place of authority while the girls dance?

The traditional arts (nihon buyo, koto, shamisen, *nagauta*, martial arts, etc.) were a cultural dividing line in the camps between Buddhist and Christian Japanese and Japanese Americans and between Issei and Nisei. The more Americanized Nisei focused on marching bands, Boy Scouts, baseball, dance halls, and big bands (Yoshida 1997). Bon-odori in the camps looked and probably felt traditional in the face of the traumatic distinction drawn between Japanese ethnicity and US citizenship, but in fact at that point it was still a recent development in Japanese American Buddhist practice. Its widespread adoption in the camps points to how quickly it took hold on the West Coast and how much the internees needed diversion, entertainment, and the powerful connective force of participatory performance (Turino 2008). It was also a performative statement about the internal politics of Japanese Americans. Kurashige (2001, 392) has described the “two factions” in most of the camps, one exemplified by JACL members, who argued for a pro-US assimilation into American culture, and the other offering a more nuanced and often more resistant position. The second faction was reframed as “pro-Japan,” and these “internees not only espoused antiwhite sentiments but also disparaged community projects and resented Manzanar’s white staff and administration. These people flaunted their preference for Japanese culture by listening to Japanese music, singing nationalistic songs, and dancing folk dances.” Roxworthy (2008, 124) argues that “Japanese traditional performing arts flourished in particular among the Issei as a corrective for WRA educational policy that often attempted to instill ethnic self-hatred in the second generation of Japanese American children interned at Manzanar and other camps.” Kurashige (2002, 50–51) reflects that ondo was a way to bridge Issei-Nisei conflicts in the 1930s. Bon-odori thus served

as a sign of difference between Japanese Americans *and* helped some of them to perform unity and cohesion.

After the end of the war and the gradual closure of the incarceration camps, some Japanese Americans reestablished themselves on the West Coast, while others relocated to the Midwest. Bon-odori was part of their cautious cultural regrouping. Akiyama (1989, 39) notes that Rev. Iwanaga's dances "were dispersed to areas throughout the country" in the postinternment years. A major Jodo Shinshu event in San Francisco in 1948 featured one thousand bon-odori dancers on the plaza of the Civic Center (40). Nisei Week was reinstated in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo in 1949, and Kurashige (2002, 119–20) quotes a *Pacific Citizen* article that announced, "The race-baiters have been routed and the songs and dances of Nisei Week serve to wipe out the memory of bitterness and frustration of the mass evacuation experience."

Rev. Iwanaga died in 1950 at the age of fifty, not long after choreographing "Fresno Ondo" to music composed by a Japanese American Buddhist woman, Chieko Taira—possibly the first bon-odori set to music by a Japanese American. Akiyama (1989, 43) describes how California temples continued to teach and perform Rev. Iwanaga's dances until around 1955. At that point, each of the eight BCA districts began to make idiosyncratic adjustments to the dances. As part of the extended postwar Japanese American effort to move from the working class into the middle class, some temples arranged for nihon buyo instructors to teach bon-odori. These classical dance teachers elevated the choreography of the folk dances and shifted the emphasis from simple participatory dances to more elaborate, professional presentations. Kurashige (2002, 144) notes that the professionalization of the dance teachers began to push out amateur participation by 1954. Other temples stayed closer to the rural, minyo feeling and simplicity of the bon-odori imagined and created by Rev. Iwanaga. They used minyo recordings from Japan and sometimes engaged minyo teachers.

In sum, bon-odori addressed different needs in the Japanese American community in the mid-twentieth century. In Rev. Iwanaga's hands, it was an invented tradition from the moment he introduced it to California to keep Niseis engaged with Buddhism. He used already mediated materials to create his dances: he drew from minyo dance moves that had already been reorganized and rechoreographed for Japanese schoolchildren, and he and his wife worked creatively to assemble the minyo dance vocabulary into pleasing arrangements. His dances and the recordings that traveled seemingly straight from Japan to California percolated through Los Angeles's Little Tokyo at a time in the 1930s when the Japanese American community was struggling to address US anxieties about its public performance tradition (Nisei Week). The fraught war years changed and didn't change the dances: in the incarceration camps, bon-odori was a means to reconstitute community and cultural identity, to perform a colorful but unthreatening difference from the non-Japanese communities surrounding the camps, and to try to bridge Issei-Nisei

generational differences. In the years immediately following the war, bon-odori helped constitute new communities in the Midwest and on the East Coast. On the West Coast, meanwhile, new class aspirations changed bon-odori from participatory to presentational staged performance. My sense is that bon-odori has never settled. On the contrary, as the Japanese American community has faced dramatic cultural challenges and undergone rapid change, bon-odori has offered a choreographic language and the promise of cultural cohesion in response to the needs of the moment. In Japanese America, it has had a uniquely (though shifting) North American cultural formation, but always built with Japanese materials. The Japanese American body danced and dances to Japanese recordings. From the 1930s to the 1950s in particular, Japanese American bon-odori was transnational in awkward ways that challenged ideologies which conflated ethnicity with national identity. Bon-odori seemed Japanese even as it outlined difficult Japanese American realities. Given the rapid cultural and political changes it has moved along with, its meanings were and are sedimented and accumulative.

“BON-ODORI UTA”

Are you ready to dance? “Bon-Odori Uta” is always the first and last dance, framing the Gathering of Joy at each temple. At a macro level, it also frames the annual Obon season in Southern California, since it is the last dance at the Nisei Week closing ceremonies in L.A.’s Little Tokyo. *Gassho* is built into the dance—it is the emblematic Buddhist gesture of placing the palms together in prayer, request, gratitude, and reverence. It is all those things at once.¹⁴ Clasp your hands in *gassho* “expresses” those modalities and, more deeply, readies the mind/body/spirit to offer them. When you recite the *Nembutsu*—*Namu Amida Butsu* (I take refuge in the Buddha of of Immeasurable Life and Light)—you do it three times, holding your hands in *gassho* at chest level.

“Bon-Odori Uta” was choreographed by Rev. Iwanaga and was probably first danced in 1934. Rev. Kodani (1999, 12) describes its genesis:

When Rev. Iwanaga chose music for the Bon-odori, he selected pieces which he thought were in tune with the spiritual meaning of Bon-odori. In addition, if he did not particularly like the choreography that accompanied the record, he did not hesitate to re-choreograph it. This he did with the song “Bon-odori,” written in 1934 by the Buddhist Music Association of the Honzan, or mother-temple in Kyoto, which today is the first and last dance of almost all temple Bon-odori. Rev. Iwanaga created a dance of simple and elegant movements which everyone could pick up and dance. It is still considered the most beautiful of our Bon-odori dances. Over the years this Bon-odori has changed, especially in Southern District where several of Rev. Iwanaga’s basic dance movements have been added to the original. Nevertheless its simple beauty is still preserved.

Haa – Bon wa na, <i>yoi sa</i> , Bon wa ureshiya Wakareta hito mo, <i>arase- yo hohohoi</i> Harate kono yo e, <i>ha</i> , Ai ni kuru	Ahh – Bon, how pleasant Bon is. Those who have parted from us Come to meet with us again, on this clear day.
Haa – kumo no na, <i>yoi sa</i> , kumo no aida kara Urayamashi geni, <i>arase- yo hohohoi</i> Odori mini kita, <i>ha</i> , Otsukisama	Ahh – the clouds from between the clods An envious moon, comes to see the dancing
Haa – Odori na, <i>yoi sa</i> , odori odoru nara Tebyoshi tatake, <i>arase- yo hohohoi</i> Choshi tsuke nakya, <i>ha</i> , Uta mo denu	Ahh – the dance, if you dance the dance Clap your hands If you don't take up the spirit of the dance The song will not come forth.
Haa – Koyoi na, <i>yoi sa</i> , koyoi deta tsuki wa Shinnyo no tsuki yo, <i>arase- yo hohohoi</i> Oya no goshoraku, <i>ha</i> , Mite kurasu	Ahh – this evening, this evening's moon A moon of True Thusness We spend this evening contemplating The religious devotion of our parents.
Haa – Odori na, <i>yoi sa</i> , odori nembutsu Ki mo karugaru to, <i>arase- yo hohohoi</i> Asu no kagyō, <i>ha</i> , Ku ni naranu	Ahh – the dance, the dance of Nembutsu The lightness and ease of spirit There will be no pain in tomorrow's labor.
Haa – Mura yon na, <i>yoi sa</i> , mura no obon yo Oemma sama no, <i>arase- yo hohohoi</i> Akai okao ga, <i>ha</i> , Wasuraryo ka	Ahh – the village, the village Obon The red face of Emma (King of Death) is forgotten.

Rev. Iwanaga took a brand-new Japanese Buddhist song and created a dance for it drawn from his understanding of minyo dance vocabulary. Neither the song nor the dance was old or traditional in any literal sense; rather, both were (re)composed from familiar materials. But both were absorbed into Japanese American practice as self-consciously traditional. Akiyama (1989, 32) writes, “In Northern California today, Reverend Iwanaga’s choreography of ‘Bon Odori’ still frames the dance portion of *Obon* Festival and was referred to at one temple as ‘the most traditional dance that we do.’” She reflects that very few people now know who choreographed it, and she notes that “‘Bon Odori’ has become a traditional, unauthored dance to the thousands of people who dance or see it” (126). The Buddhist Musical Association of Japan commissioned the music,¹⁵ and the lyrics, by the composer Seisui Fujii, are about Obon, bon-odori, and Buddhist belief. The Japanese lyrics and English translation are above, with the *kakegoe* in italics (Kodani 1999, 27).

“Bon-Odori Uta” is performed counterclockwise. *Uta* means “song.” Akiyama (1989) refers to the song and dance simply as “Bon Odori,” and her description of the dance movements suggests she thinks it has a metaperformative function and is an enactment of Japanese American Buddhist community. She writes from a position of deep experience. Her account of the choreography and its meaning for many Japanese American bon-odori dancers is exactly right, and I can do no better:

The dance is very simple. Following the line of direction, the dancer holds a flat fan in the right hand. Each dancer moves slowly, stepping on the right foot with slightly bent leg, facing away from the center of the circle. The dancer then touches the left foot in place while straightening the right leg; at the same time each hand traces a half circle, arms moving from low to side to place high on both sides of the body ending with palms facing up. This is a traditional *minyō* movement motif and is performed three times, first on the right foot, then left and right. When the dancer steps right she faces away from the center of the circle and when she steps left, she faces the center. Next, all dancers step left and face the center of the circle. The dancer touches right foot in place as the hands are brought close to the body at waist level, palms up. The dancer pauses momentarily then steps forward on the right foot, sweeping the fan toward the center of the circle, then stepping back of [*sic*] the left, followed by the right foot stepping in place as the free hand claps the fan in front of the body and then to the left. The dance then begins again.

The slow, short dance phrase is repeated over and over. Midway through, as everyone is moving together, there is a sense of community, of being carried along by the motion of all the other dancers. Even those who have never seen the dance before or who don't consider themselves good dancers are able to join in during "Bon Odori". The number of dancers swell when "Bon Odori" is performed for the last time. In Northern California, this is the time when people from the audience, both Japanese and non-Japanese, are most apt to join in the dancing.

"Bon Odori" reminds the members of the temple that the dances are also part of a larger religious observance. The music and choreography have a reverent quality. While the audience talks and jokes during the other dances, there is a sense of attentiveness during "Bon Odori" even though very few people today understand the lyrics. It leads everyone into the festival, and then, at the end it provides a sense of closure. Following "Bon Odori", a minister of the temple leads the participants in the *Nembutsu*. The event is thus framed in religious ritual. (127–28)

This dance and its music move communities (literally and affectively) in ways much like taiko does: both have accrued significant meanings. The dance has been rechoreographed, collectively reconstituted, and its history is remembered in certain ways and forgotten in others. The sound of the remastered yet still slightly distorted recording to which it is performed immediately draws the dancers into a state of ethnicized Buddhist collectivity and readiness. We dance, in the words of the poet Garrett Hongo (2004, 459), "as if it were a memory," an experience "of [our] own dreaming," powerful because it is the result of individual and collective effort that has been lost, rediscovered, transformed, and reauthored.

BON-ODORI AS PILGRIMAGE

Bon-odori is danced for many reasons. Since the very first pilgrimage to Manzanar, in 1969, circle dances—both ondo and bon-odori—have been performed at the remote sites of some internment camps as a contemporary commemorative ritual articulating memory and resistance in a distinctively Sansei way.

Angered by the Vietnam War, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, and mystified by Nisei silence about the internment, a core group of young Sansei—many of them still activists today—organized a bus trip to Manzanar in 1969. Victor Shibata was the young activist who suggested calling the trip a pilgrimage, or “a journey back, to pay our respects,” as Warren Furutani says in Tad Nakamura’s (2006) documentary *Pilgrimage*. This first pilgrimage was emblematic of the early Asian American Movement: urgently informed by the need to reclaim Asian American history, its participants were also trying to create and sustain new political collectivities.

Photographs and film footage of dances at the first pilgrimages are compelling. I’m not entirely comfortable calling them *ondo*, though most archival accounts describe them as such (see figure 19, Manzanar Pilgrimage *ondo*, 1970s, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). *Ondo* is a generic Japanese term for secular, minyo-derived street dance and is used, for example, in “First Street Ondo,” featured in the annual Nisei Week in L.A.’s Little Tokyo in August. While I know that dance teachers could discuss the similarities and differences between *ondo* and *bon-odori* for hours, my sense is that the key distinction is context and purpose. I argue that the pilgrimage dance circle was (and is) *bon-odori*, not only because it is the same as the dances performed at Obon but, more important, because its purpose is so clearly connected to commemorating, honoring, and remembering the dead.

The religious studies scholar Joanne Doi (2003) explicitly connected the 1996 Tule Lake Pilgrimage to Obon. She describes the long bus ride to the site as integrally part of the experience, full of passengers’ discussions, the folding of origami cranes in preparation for the memorial service, and Japanese box lunches. For her, this all sparked a feelingful set of associations: “The atmosphere of food and community brought back memories of the familiar church bazaars that resembled the Obon festivals that remember and honor the dead during the summer months” (278). Tule Lake is an especially fraught site in the already troubled arena of the internment camps because No-No Boys (those who answered no to questions 27 and 28 of the infamous “loyalty questionnaire” administered to all Japanese Americans in the camps), “disloyals,” and political activists were incarcerated there. In historical perspective, it is now viewed as important precisely because its internees were known for their self-determination and resistance. Contemporary participants in the Tule Lake Pilgrimage are thus aware of its extraordinary place in the trauma of the incarceration, and they pay homage to its history of struggle. Doi writes, “Remembering the forgotten dead of Tule Lake reconstitutes the living and dead as community, reminiscent of the Obon midsummer festival that marks the temporary return of the spirits of the dead” (284). She cites Obon as a way to reconstitute Tule Lake’s internees as a community willing to speak against injustice.

Doi takes it even further, describing this annual gathering as a “post-colonial pilgrimage” (275), in which the relationship between Japanese Americans (and

Muslim Americans) and the US nation-state is haunted by histories of paranoia and discrimination. The act of visiting the site—or playing taiko or dancing in it—addresses the incomplete or even reluctant effort to enter the nation-state on its authoritative terms. If the moment of rupture, trauma, and separation is in the past, the present is not yet in a state of completion.

Nakamura's lovely *Pilgrimage* builds up to bon-odori in an extremely moving way. At 16:29, this documentary shows the ondo circle at the 2005 pilgrimage, but only after interviews with participants have demonstrated how the pilgrimages since 9/11 have explicitly connected Muslim American and Japanese American civil rights issues. After clips of interviews with young Muslims at the pilgrimage, the dancers are seen with the stark white Manzanar monument and the snow-capped Sierra Nevada behind them. A young woman in a plaid shirt and jeans spins joyously in place, and I recognize the move and her exuberance—she's dancing "Shiawase Samba"! The next brief clip shows the circle dancing "Tanko Bushi," with an experienced dancer in the foreground and, behind her, many first-timers finding their way into it. Nakamura then quickly alternates color footage of the dancing from 2005 with black-and-white ondo footage from the 1970s, to startling effect. His editing reveals the additive meanings of dance, pilgrimage, and memory. (See figure 20, *bon-odori* in a Manzanar Pilgrimage, 1970s, at <http://wonderandfaster.com>.)

I participated in the Manzanar Pilgrimage twice (in 2003 and 2007), during a particularly uneasy period when two problems dominated: post-9/11 threats to civil liberties and the transfer of Manzanar to the National Park Service (NPS). In a spectacular example of coalition politics immediately following 9/11, the JAFL argued that Muslim Americans should not bear the brunt of xenophobic fear, and from then on the Manzanar Pilgrimage routinely included Muslims American participants (many from the Council on American-Islamic Relations) and paid explicit attention to the parallels between post-Pearl Harbor nativism and 9/11 xenophobia. Almost a decade before, the establishment of Manzanar as a National Historic Site in 1992 had put official and unofficial memories into a direct relationship borne out through every aspect of the park and the pilgrimage: the pilgrimage had been created to assert the importance of unofficial memory, history, and experience, so the hyperofficial process of setting up the national park and all its exhibits juxtaposed different kinds of commemorative processes. From the beginning, the NPS evidently embraced the pilgrimage as part of the site's meaning and significance (and lists it on the park's website as an annual event), but what the anthropologist Christina Schwenkel (2009, 12) calls "recombinant history," "the interweaving of diverse and frequently discrepant transnational memories, knowledge formations, and logics of representation," is more deeply part of bon-odori than ever in the pilgrimage ondo circle. Unlike the post-Vietnam War context addressed by Schwenkel, the pilgrimage is not explicitly focused on reconciliation. Redress and reparations demand profoundly different performatives. Bon-odori

nevertheless stretches to include coalition groups as well as NPS rangers who dance in full uniform.

“TANKO BUSHI”

The ondo circle is the last part of the pilgrimage’s two- to three-hour program, which also features speeches, music (songs and always a taiko group), the roll call of the camps, and an interdenominational service held in the cemetery in front of the Manzanar monument. The dance offers a transition out of collective sorrow and anger into participatory joy and determination, enacting a different kind of commemoration in a long morning full of remembrance.

“Tanko Bushi” is almost always one of these dances. Sometimes it is also danced as part of the Manzanar at Dusk program. Indeed, it is danced in most Japanese and Japanese American Obon gatherings. Its ubiquity is striking because it carries no inherent or ever-ready symbolic meaning. It is originally from Fukuoka Prefecture (in the south of Japan), but its specific regional identity seems only superficially part of its popularity. Terence Lancashire (2011, 63) notes that it was a folk song sung by female workers in the coal mines in Tagawa, Fukuoka Prefecture, and that a schoolteacher named Ono Hoko rearranged it in 1910. His version was recorded in 1932 and by a famous geisha in 1948, then by the singer Otomaru in 1957, and so on. It was featured in the 1957 film *Sayonara* starring Marlon Brando. The song has gone through repeated rearrangements and remediations. The dance has been thoroughly choreographed but during my years of participation was always performed to the same commercial recording, featuring the *enka* singer Suzuki Masao.¹⁶ This recording’s dissemination is nothing short of astonishing, and it has jumped across a range of technologies from its original form as a 78 rpm record.

The dance offers a straightforward programmatic representation of coal miners’ work. As Akiyama (1989, 120) writes, “‘Tanko Bushi’ is one of several bon odori depicting the work of coal miners. It has become extremely popular with people in Japan and with Japanese Americans and is performed on social occasions such as Japanese American picnics as well as during Obon Festivals. The song and dance was also popular among American soldiers in Japan after World War II.” “Tanko Bushi” is a dance that can be featured in nearly any context. The series of moves are always explained as literal depictions of first digging for coal (to the right, then to the left), tossing a shovelful over the shoulder (right, then left), shading the eyes to look at the sun (or moon, depending on the teacher) while stepping backward, pushing a cart loaded with coal while stepping forward, and then throwing the coal onto a heap (by casting both hands down and away from the body while stepping in toward the center of the circle). Some teachers say the final gesture opens a gate. As in most bon-odori, the dancers move counterclockwise. “Tanko Bushi” is extremely simple: it is almost a primer for basic odori gestural vocabulary.

Despite—or perhaps because of—its simplicity, several sources describe the choreography in detail. A website devoted to bon-odori and featuring the Japanese dance teacher Yoshiko Ikemura Sensei offers this step-by-step explanation of the dance, in English that conveys the feeling of the Japanese from which it is clearly translated:

Tankobushi (炭坑節) is the most popular Bon Odori Song. All Bon Odori Matsuri always play this song. So, it is this basic and simple dance which everyone can dance easily.

Tankobushi “The song of Coal Miners”

(walk counterclockwise)

Song: Masao Suzuki.

Level: 01 Very Easy

Type: Basic

Move:

Face your stomach to the walking direction.

Count Four when music starts.

Clap, clap and clap.

grab your hands just like you are grabbing a scoop for coal mining.

Dig, dig (right),

Then, dig, dig (left).

Carry coals. Carry coals.

You are getting out from underground.

Then you see beautiful moon. watch it two times.

Push your lorry. Push your lorry.

Then, open gate. Then, back to clap clap and clap.

Repeat.¹⁷

This version relies on video and text to convey the details of the choreography. In her lovely little book documenting the bon-odori repertoire in Hawai‘i, Van Zile offers detailed schematic drawings of the dances, including a set for “Tanko Bushi” (see figure 21, schematic drawings for “Tanko Bushi,” at <http://wonglou-derandfaster.com>). Similarly, the children’s book *Bon Odori Dancer* (McCoy and Yao 1999) provides illustrated instructions for the dance after telling the tale of Keiko, “the clumsiest girl in her Japanese dance class,” who is consumed with anxiety over her two left feet but eventually performs with grace and confidence at her local Obon festival. “Tanko Bushi” is thus both frequently danced and much documented, across a variety of media (as are other bon-odori choreographies). First a regional dance about women’s labor, it became a kind of catchall for traditionality and an invitation to participate thanks to its simplicity and intelligibility. That minimalism allowed it to travel far, through the bodies of immigrants, through a transpacific flow of sound recordings, and then through the internet. Japanese American political practice transplanted it into both secular invented

ritual and a fiercely new kind of sacred heritage: as danced in the desert dust and under the hot desert sun, “Tanko Bushi” in situ in the Manzanar Pilgrimage is an invitation to participate in oppositional memory. It is an integral part of sustained remediated heritage work that asserts uncomfortable histories without explicitly connecting the dots. Women once worked in the coal mines in Fukuoka and marveled at the beauty of the sun or the moon when they emerged from underground. Now Japanese Americans, Muslim Americans, and NPS rangers dance together in the space of injury.

CREATING NEW BON-ODORI

At the time of this writing, Los Angeles’s Little Tokyo serves a bustling combination of contradictory needs, from tourism to Buddhist space to a grassroots anti-development movement focused on cultural self-determination. Post-1970s Little Tokyo is an ongoing experiment in Japanese American community making.¹⁸ The neighborhood was designated a National Historic District in 1986 but has nonetheless been threatened by outside financial interests and gentrification. Several nonprofit community organizations—including the Little Tokyo People’s Rights Organization, the Little Tokyo Anti-eviction Task Force, the Friends of Little Tokyo Arts, and the Little Tokyo Service Center—have pushed back, arguing over and over that the neighborhood should serve the needs of Japanese Americans, from housing for the elderly to community-based athletics.

The proxemics and body politic of bon-odori are all over Little Tokyo. During the nine months of the year outside the Obon season, visual hints keep the dances close by and mark the spaces where they could materialize. Tile images of dance hats from northern Japan are embedded in the asphalt of the First Street and Central Avenue intersection, reminding one that the street is as much a site of the annual “First Street Ondo” as a thoroughfare. The beautiful courtyard between Second and Third Streets outside the JACCC was designed by Isamu Noguchi as a public gathering place.¹⁹ Its circular shape is designed for bon dancing, which (among many other things) has repeatedly taken place in the plaza since it was finished in 1983. I view it as a bon-odori circle waiting to happen: the bricks are arranged in concentric circles, and I have seen bon-odori performed there many times, enacting the principles of community in a charged space of Japanese American self-determination. Like most of Little Tokyo, the plaza reclaimed Japanese American presence after World War II. (See figure 22, *bon-odori* fans etched into a crosswalk in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>.)

Taiko and bon-odori are key symbols of postwar Japanese American presence. The mural at Central and First Streets titled *Home Is Little Tokyo* (2005) sums up the hundred-year history of the neighborhood and the twenty-first-century emphasis on certain forms of cultural heritage (see figure 23, *Home Is Little Tokyo* mural, Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). In keeping

with the tradition of community murals, this was the result of a painstaking process of consultation and execution, “the culmination of three years of work by almost 500 individuals, groups and organizations”: the muralists, Tony Osumi, Sergio Diaz, and Jorge Diaz, solicited ideas for the content from community organizations, and the public painting involved hundreds of people.²⁰ Three taiko players drum joyously on the left. On the right, among others, a girl dribbles a basketball, another girl wears a karate gi, an activist raises a sign supporting the Little Tokyo Recreation Center, a young man carries an elderly Issei man, a Latino shopkeeper displays vegetables for sale—all these figures speak to the neighborhood’s complex history and needs. A bon-odori dancer stands in their midst: a woman in a pink yukata holding an uchiwa, arms raised in the moon position.

Inspired by the principles of the Asian American Movement, at least three Japanese American women have created new bon-odori dances with accompanying music, and each has done so in deeply informed ways, activating bon-odori to build a self-consciously Japanese American participatory culture from traditional materials. Nobuko Miyamoto, PJ Hirabayashi, and Michelle Fujii (whom I introduce in more detail below) have offered new approaches to bon-odori that build on almost a century of music and dance, reassembling traditional materials in vivid and original ways that the West Coast Japanese American Jodo Shinshu community has embraced. Since the 1970s, Sansei reclamation and ownership of bon-odori has driven a number of vibrant experiments, all framed as dynamically part of the tradition rather than as contemporary departures. As already mentioned, Miyamoto and Rev. Mas Kodani have created a number of original songs and bon-odori choreographies outlining specifically Japanese American issues and concerns (Asai 2016).²¹ Similarly, Hirabayashi’s music and dance for “Ei Ja Nai Ka” address the history of Asian American laborers.²²

Each of these artists has carefully defined the context for their new works. All have been at pains to indicate that their songs and dances are meant to live in the community and that their purpose is inherently participatory. The audience for “Omiyage” is the most explicitly outlined of any taiko piece I have encountered. *Omiyage* means “gift” in Japanese and often refers to the small gifts you offer when you are visiting someone or give to friends and family when you return from a trip. This work was designed as a gift to the taiko community and is carefully listed on various websites as conceived by Bryan Yamami, composed by Shoji Kameda, and originally performed (quite spectacularly) by TAIKOPROJECT. Kameda has stated that “Omiyage” is

a piece that I originally wrote for TAIKOPROJECT and have since released under a free art license as a gift to the North American Taiko community. Bryan Yamami first conceived of a piece called “Omiyage” for TAIKOPROJECT (re)generation that TAIKOPROJECT would workshop to the various communities it would visit. I have Kris [Bergstrom] to thank for expanding the “Omiyage” concept in terms of releasing

it under a free art license. My work and On Ensemble's music and recordings are released under a more restrictive creative commons, attribution non-commercial, share-alike license, but I often have interesting conversations with Kris regarding free art and admire his commitment to the concept. I wanted to do something under the free art license and "Omiyage" was a logical choice.²³

Bergstrom (2008, 2011) has written at length about free art licensing and copyleft. Significantly, the core group of musicians who generated "Omiyage" and "Korekara" (discussed in the next paragraph) had all grown up with kumi-daiko, were leaders in collegiate groups, and went on to shine in the professional TAIKOPROJECT or On Ensemble. Their impressive knowledge of taiko history and culture led to their emphasis on open-source work. I view it as a generational response as well, since the pieces are unabashedly contemporary yet familiar, exuberant yet based on recognizable kumi-daiko rhythms.

In 2005, the NATC created a Song Committee, made up of Fujii, Bergstrom, Walter Clarke, and Yuta Kato, and charged it with creating a piece for the biannual conference. The result was "Korekara," which is now played all over the world. It is always described as "composed" by Fujii and Clarke, and Bergstrom, Kameda, Kato, and Hitomi Oba are listed as "artistic advisors." As a collaborative effort, the music and dance were taught in workshops led by all those musicians during the spring of 2005, hosted by different taiko groups across Southern California, and were performed at that year's NATC by over eighty local taiko players. The notation was included in the participants' packets, and in the explanatory notes accompanying it, the Song Committee wrote,

It's YOUR song!

We hope *Korekara* is considered a successful and interesting piece that piques the interest of members of our community. ~We hope to see new versions of the song, tailored to the different taiko styles among us. . . . ~We hope you will take *Korekara* and make it your own. ~In doing so you will be contributing to a creative pool of taiko music for our community, free to be learned, practiced, performed, and enjoyed by all!

In one workshop I attended—hosted by Hikari Taiko—Fujii, Clarke, and Bergstrom carefully and efficiently broke the piece down into component parts, teaching the sections first through kuchi shōga and air taiko before moving on to the dance (see video 9, Michelle Fujii, Walter Clarke, and Kris Bergstrom teaching "Korekara" at the Southeast Japanese School and Community Center in Norwalk, California, 2005, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). Fujii is known for her training and her ability to make traditional moves contemporary, and she had choreographed "Korekara" for taiko players in a unison counterclockwise circle, like bon-odori. Since then, I have seen it performed many times by many groups.

Fujii is Japanese American and was in her mid-twenties in 2005, and Clarke is African American and was then in his early thirties. Both have had leadership positions in several key Southern California taiko groups. Fujii came up through the vibrant collegiate taiko scene and went to Japan for several years after college to study traditional dance and taiko; she was at that time a member of two recent, cutting-edge, young taiko groups in greater Los Angeles, On Ensemble and TAIKOPROJECT. Clarke had studied taiko for several decades and was a long-time member of two Los Angeles taiko groups, Kishin Daiko and Kodama Taiko. “Korekara” was a response to controversies over narrowed access to taiko repertoire. Fujii and Clarke wanted to teach “Korekara” to as many Southern California taiko players as they could during the two months before the big conference in 2005 and then to debut it at the conference’s opening ceremony. Their idea from the beginning was that the piece would be in the public domain, not owned or controlled by any individual or ensemble. They thus created a wholly new category of taiko repertoire, driven by the political economy of its historical moment.

The impetus behind this public domain piece lay in sharply delineated tensions between a Japanese taiko group and its concern over how North American taiko groups were using its material, which led in 1999 to a new level of discussion about such issues as Japanese and North American taiko relations, cultural ownership, and authority (Wong 2004, 223–25). “Korekara” was a response to that debate, put forward by taiko players for other taiko players, with little explicit acknowledgement of its generating circumstances but lots of then-recent history just under the surface. It is emblematic of a North American taiko subjectivity that overlaps with but is distinct from Japanese practices. It has a deep and self-conscious base in heritage: on the West Coast, it is difficult if not impossible to play taiko without engaging directly with Japanese American culture and history, which means knowing something about the incarceration, Obon festivals, the reparations movement of the 1980s, and the Asian American Movement generally.

“Korekara” sounds and looks simultaneously Japanese and Japanese American. Its base pattern is a classic festival rhythm, which broadcasts a joyously upbeat mood immediately understood by any taiko player, and indeed by many Japanese Americans. The dance section is instantly recognizable as a bon-odori dance, albeit an utterly new and decidedly contemporary one. It evokes and could potentially be absorbed into Obon practice as a bon dance. It is performed in a large circle, in unison, and features certain movements (wiping sweat from the brow, *yama*/mountain) found in many bon dances. (See video 10, Michelle Fujii teaching the “Korekara” dance to taiko players at the Southeast Japanese School and Community Center in Norwalk, California, 2005, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>.)

In short, the dance vocabulary for this piece, its spatial arrangement, and its upbeat mood instantly activate the joyousness of Obon and of Japanese American community. “Korekara” debuted at the taiko conference in Los Angeles on July 15, 2005 (see video 11, “Korekara” debut at the North American Taiko Conference

in Los Angeles, July 15, 2005, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). I videotaped it (though I wanted to perform!), and I know the piece quite well because I participated in three of the workshops leading up to this event.

“Korekara” was designed to make a performative statement about repertoire and community ownership. It was not meant to be a radical recontextualization: its two composers are well versed in North American taiko history and clearly see themselves as participants in that tradition; it’s equally evident that they see taiko as having a past as well as a future (which they are trying to help shape). “Korekara” emulates bon dances, but it is *part of* that tradition, not on the outside looking in. As with all performance anywhere, the thing being performed and taught is a palimpsest, a multilayered historical artifact of movements across many times and places. Taiko carries connections to postwar Japanese nationalism, Japanese American politicization, and more. “Korekara” addresses a community embroiled in discussions about its own sources of authority, and it was put forward by two taiko players eager to push those discussions in a productive direction. By creating a contemporary bon dance and its music, they added to one of the key bodies politic of the Japanese American community.

DANCING WITHOUT END

I now experience the sadness of the end of the Obon season. The season follows a predictable arc. The last Obon festivals at Southern California temples are always held on the first weekend in August, followed by a two-week hiatus and then the large street ondo featuring bon-odori during the Nisei Week closing ceremony. Dancing down East First Street in Little Tokyo is beautiful and meaningful, but it feels very different from the temple gatherings. As this is the last chance to dance bon-odori for a year, large numbers of aficionados turn out. We dance with the spirit of Obon, but it’s hard not to feel a little melancholy—it’s like the day after Christmas, when the ephemerality of the season’s beauty is evident and fully appreciated as part of its significance.

Some bon-odori are well known; others are revived and retaught; others are made anew. The new/old inauthentic/authentic bon-odori tradition is spectacularly alive and well. It is sustained by a Buddhist organizational structure of pedagogy and dissemination that reaches more than ten thousand dancers every summer in Southern California alone. The dances are imbued with traditionality yet constantly made contemporary, and young dancers are always boisterously present in the circles alongside the statelier, middle-aged and elderly dancers. I love all of it and particularly enjoy a rambunctious recent tradition I’ve encountered since 2014 at Nishi Hongwanji, Higashi Hongwanji, and the Gardena Buddhist Church. After the first hour of dancing, there is a fifteen-minute break, when dancers flock to the food and drink booths. The intermission ends when, without any fanfare, a recent pop hit is suddenly put on the PA system, and one by one, dancers line up

and spontaneously perform any of the more well-known bon-odori to the song. Everyone falls into the same dance once several people have found their groove. In August 2014 at the Gardena Obon, we danced “One Plus One” to Pharrell’s “Happy” (rather than the Japanese song usually used, sung by Suizenji Kiyoko). “Happy” is just a shade faster, so the dance felt slightly frantic but also dizzily fun, like playing musical chairs. In July 2016 we danced “Tanko Bushi” to “Uptown Funk.”²⁴ At some point further back, I remember dancing “Tanko Bushi” to Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”—or was it “Billy Jean”? These transitional moments in the evening are never announced, but after a minute or so all the dancers have returned, the concentric circles have re-formed, and suddenly hundreds of people, from small children to octogenarians, are dancing to the sounds of the top ten. This giddy choreographic moment reconstitutes the circles. It’s the history of Japanese American bon-odori from the inside out—the groove and not-quite-in-unison body politic that bring us together every summer.

Transition

Unison and Circles

Dancing in circles. Playing in unison. Both are performance practices that create sociality. A circle may have a leader, but the bon-odori circles don't. Bon-odori circles are directed inward, toward the taiko in the tower. Sameness and difference. Some music and dance traditions assume that everyone does things differently; others insist on sameness; yet others celebrate the tension between the two. The space of performance creates separation or connection: the proscenium stage versus the powwow circle. None of this is simple, and the binaries I seem to suggest are never just that. Participatory discrepancies abound within sameness. Kumi-daiko often oscillates between ensemble unison playing and breakout improvised solos. Bon-odori never features solos but rather assumes unison movement while allowing for individual flourishes. The circles for bon-odori are embedded in the landscape of L.A.'s Little Tokyo: brick circles built into the courtyard connecting the Aratani Theatre and the JACCC, white paint circles on the asphalt parking lot outside the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist temple. The circles are always there, ready to be activated.