

Cruising the Pac Rim

Driven to Thrill

I would like to get a whole DVD full of the Mitsubishi Girl's music, and an autographed picture too..of course..they are sooo cool..and so is the commercial :-)

—MICHAEL, JULY 30, 2005

Taiko was featured in a 2005 TV ad for a car. In this chapter, I triangulate cars, taiko, Asian Americans, the Pacific Rim, mobile culture, globalization, and transnationalism. I work through three sites here, each defined in different ways and subject to different interpretive issues. The first is the TV commercial, the second is the transnational movement of musics through globalized economies, and the third is an ethnographic encounter in which I participated.

Asian American studies scholars have productively engaged with Asian popular culture as part of Asian America. Japanese popular culture in particular—anime, Hello Kitty paraphernalia made “hip” via ironic consumption, and so on—is omnipresent in West Coast Asian American youth culture. The circulation of material goods between “Asia” and the US reflects new global economies and the inheritance of high orientalism, which combine to create odd new Asian–North American encounters that are sometimes deliberately deracinated and positioned as an apolitical, postmodernist aesthetic. Taiko is a potential response to such postindustrial constructions of a world beyond race and class, even though it too is the result of Pacific flows. If its loud, sweaty, and folkloric gestures seem hopelessly out of step to some young Asian Americans (Gen Y Asian Americans), then it bears asking how the Asian or Asian American body now operates in a new Pacific theater of economic and cultural exchange. Paul Gilroy’s (1993) powerful conceptualization of the Black Atlantic forced a new way of thinking about the historical movements of people and/as goods and a necessary understanding of culture and difference as interconstitutive. The Asian and Asian American Pacific

likewise repoliticizes the region, making visible the links between corporate and liberal humanist constructions of an open Pacific Rim.

The political economies of musical transnationalism drive virtually all musical practices in the twenty-first century. Few musics are beyond these forces: most popular, art, and folk musics are mediated and mobile. As Timothy D. Taylor (2016, 82) writes, “Perhaps the main symptom of globalization in the cultural industries has been their growing internationalization as parts of multinational corporations,” and he traces the music industry in neoliberal capitalism as a cultural form with pervasive effects. The movement of musics through globalized economies and across national borders shapes how ideologies of difference are constructed and maintained. Race and gender are always more than a reflection of the local.

Thick interpretive work on specific places, practices, peoples, and moments is important and necessary but should reveal the movement between the local and the global. Taylor (2016, 182) urges us to “study down” and attend to the experiences of musicians making choices in globalized neoliberal capitalism. Ideally, our critical work will circle back and activate gendered and raced understandings of theory and methodology. In this chapter, I offer several kinds of interpretive work, including reading a fixed object, reading the actions of participants, reading what participants say about their own actions, reading my own experience, reading theory, and reading associatively between spheres. This chapter is meant to be like anti-illusionist theater in the Brechtian sense, in which the seams show and you aren’t swept up by theoretical, commodified, or ethnographic spectacle. The ethnography of mediated international encounter is hard work but necessary for anyone living in a borderlands or on the Pacific Rim. Finally, I hope you are left with a sense of movement and the feeling that your own identifications or commitments—as a consumer, performer, or cultural worker—can land at more than one point.

I begin with an object. The sixty-second TV commercial for the 2006 Mitsubishi Eclipse was filmed in April 2005. This ad offers rich evidence of taiko as a globalized (oriental) (erotic) commodity that is the result of Pacific Rim capitalism. It opens with three dark silhouettes against a cloudy gray sky: a large odaiko in the center with a figure before it, arms down, framed by two figures on either side. We hear a drum stroke—*DON*—and two fiery flares shoot up at each end of the stage, briefly illuminating the drummers’ red costumes. We hear a solo flute—perhaps a *fue*—play a melancholy rising minor third, and the camera cuts to a red Eclipse seen from the rear driver’s side. The driver’s door is open. The camera jumps to a view from the front driver’s side, and the driver’s door shuts. As the camera cuts from behind to in front, we see and hear the door shut twice, with taiko strokes—*don DON*—layered over the sound. The camera pans across a close-up of “GT V6” on the car, and then we see the front headlights come on as the taiko begin a sustained riff: *don DON don-DON* (rest), *don DON don-DON* (rest) . . . Over those eight beats, we see the entire taiko group, now lit but still fairly far away: eight

young women in red dresses, with seven chudaiko and the one large odaiko, on tiered risers. The flames flare up again, synchronized with the *DON* on beat two of the measure (*don DON*). In fast-cut shots of less than a second each, we see a hand in the dark interior of the car shift gears, a black boot hit the accelerator, and the needle on the accelerometer go up. The car whooshes by in a blur, and the camera cuts to a close-up of the odaiko player. The odaiko fills most of the frame, and we see the young woman from the waist up, bare backed, reach back and strike the drumhead with both huge bachi at once, on beat two of the pattern: *don DON don-DON*. The camera cuts to one of the car's hubcaps, which spins blurrily as we hear a gong stroke—*ccccccccrasssssh*—that seems to emerge from its shaky movement. We see the car swoosh by and then three taiko players, their legs spread wide, play *don-DON*. Over the next four beats—*don DON don-DON* (rest)—we see the car on a dark, wet road; we see all the taiko players; we see the flames shoot up, once again on beat two (*DON*), with another gong stroke underneath. We see two taiko players from the side—odaiko and chudaiko—raise their arms and strike their drums. We see the car on the dark, wet road as if we were looking down from a bridge; the road is lined with fluorescent white lights, and the words “Professional driver on closed course. Do not attempt” appear briefly across it. The car comes toward us and blurs out. Is it drifting? We see taiko players' hands, drumheads, and bachi for less than a second, and then the same two taiko players as before, from the side, but this time the odaiko player is out of focus and our eyes are drawn to the chudaiko player in the foreground as she strikes and shouts “YAH!” This is the first time we have heard any of the musicians' voices: it is halfway through the ad, at the twenty-eight-second mark. Inside the car, we see the driver's hand shift gears. As the car surges forward, we hear a second kakegoe (shout)—the same woman?—“Waaah!” We see the accelerometer needle shoot up toward sixty, and then the camera pans across a row of three young women furiously playing upright okedo on stands. The sound of taiko is now filled in: we hear sixteenth notes echoing the busy hand work of the bachi, even though the sound and image don't align. For a split second, we see round interior car parts—probably pistons—moving in time with the shime's sixteenth notes. We see three taiko players for less than a second before they are drowned out by a rising wall of flame and another sustained kakegoe—“WAAAAH!”—car-women-car-women-car-women, the camera shuttling back and forth as the flute plays a frantic, high-pitched riff. The odaiko player is seen again from the side, but she blurs into a silhouette as she plays. The car is driving toward a huge ball of flame. The odaiko player is now playing sixteenth notes, *dondondondon*, the car is rocketing along, and we suddenly see a taiko player's face in close-up, for the first time: her eyes and eyebrows, unmistakably Asian. The flute is wailing, the car surges toward us, and we see a chudaiko head from above as a drummer's hands and bachi come down on it, *dondondondon DON!* The drums abruptly stop at the forty-three-second mark, and the car flies by: a tail of smoke and a shuddery gong stroke mark the silence. At the forty-four-second mark, we

see a chudaiko player in silhouette from the side—her face and shoulders—as she inhales, then exhales, and we hear her breathe. The sonic intimacy of her breath makes it clear what’s happened: climax → release. Suddenly it all starts up again—car-women-car-women-car-women, the drums and flute both wild, the car drifting—and at the fifty-second mark a woman screams as the car spin-drifts almost 180 degrees. The camera cuts back to a proscenium-stage shot of the taiko players as they play one last *dondondondon DON* and then stop. They don’t freeze: after their last drum stroke they relax slightly, and that split-second sense of release is erotic. A man’s voice says, “Introducing the all-new 2006 Mitsubishi Eclipse.” The screen fades to black and we see the words “The all-new 2006 Eclipse.” The camera cuts to a full-body shot of the car in repose as the narrator continues, “Available six-speed, two-hundred-and-sixty-three-horse MIVEC V6.” The Mitsubishi logo, three red diamonds, spins across the screen, and its impact—*splat!*—is marked by a . . . single door slam? shime strike? followed by the narrator saying, “Driven to thrill.”

This commercial was shot on April 26–27, 2005, at a studio named the Stages at Playa Vista, in Southern California. It was directed by Samuel Bayer, best known for helming Nirvana’s music video for “Smells like Teen Spirit” and videos for Green Day. The music is by Stewart Copeland, formerly the drummer for the Police and now a well-established composer. The taiko performers were drawn from three Southern California groups: TAIKOPROJECT, UCLA’s Kyodo Taiko, and Venice Koshin Taiko. Most of the commercial’s visual tropes are well established and familiar: it’s assumed that the car’s driver is a man, although he is never seen, and the car is a woman—indeed, it is a powerful and powerfully erotic Asian woman in a skintight red dress. If you drive the car, you drive her. The sound engineering of the commercial is intensely effective and brilliantly coordinated with visual cues.

I’m reluctant to address this Mitsubishi Eclipse commercial, because naming the endlessly repeated tropes of commercialized orientalism reiterates them. In my past writing, I have addressed the use of taiko in the 1993 film *Rising Sun* (Wong 2004, 209–14),² but other examples abound. Taiko players love to talk about taiko scenes in film and television because we know who the performers are: they are *known*—they usually aren’t faceless generic stand-ins. In the first *Charlie’s Angels* film (2000), for example, Zenshuji Zendeko Taiko is in the background playing the hell out of their drums while Bill Murray and Tim Curry as the villain go at it in sumo suits.³ The Mitsubishi Eclipse ad is thus an almost banal place to look, because mediated racist representation is the norm. There are no pure spaces. Rather than simply offer a close reading of this ad and thereby treat it and myself as the interrogator as contained, unitary subjects and objects, respectively, I instead locate my reading as an exercise in antiracist and anti-imperialist work, with attention to the experiences of those most closely involved.

One of my long-term concerns is the absence, ephemerality, and vulnerability of something that might be called an Asian American public sphere. Silence and

invisibility are the twin demons of being Asian American. I search for an Asian American public sphere not out of cultural nationalism but because the visibility and audibility of communities are predicated on democracy, however defined. Minoritarian communities live their own discursive realities, which may or may not be known in the macro systems of majority culture. If there is an Asian American public sphere—and I think there is, sometimes, in some places—it is both necessary and impure. Constructing “an” Asian American public sphere or diverse Asian American public spheres creates presence, and presence creates the possibility of a tipping point. This entire project, however, is complicated by the powerfully troubling perception of Asian Americans as eternal foreigners and unassimilable Others, with one foot out the door. The new Pacific Rim generated new kinds of global distribution, but it also reactivated some very old ideas about Asian and American incongruities.

TRANSNATIONALISM AND GLOBALIZATION

Taylor (2001, 135) warns that “the term *globalization* can hide old forms of exploitation dressed up in contemporary business language.” Lawrence Grossberg (2005, 147) argues that globalization goes hand in hand with the partner forces of modernization, industrialization, and late corporate capitalism. It serves the needs of a specific kind of international finance market, which emerged with postindustrial information technologies. As Grossberg puts it, “The interests of this highly mobile finance capital were not always well served by the nationally organized systems of industrial capitalism. Newly empowered neo-liberal and neo-conservative regimes in the advanced capitalist world championed a new discourse of free trade, deregulation, marketization, and privatization.” Market globalization ideology was most broadly operationalized during the administrations of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK. Its principles—downplayed spatial relationships, free trade, outsourcing, supply chains—drove flat-world international arrangements like the North American Free Trade Agreement and institutions like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (Friedman 2005). Grossberg (2005, 148) points to the concomitant glorification of information technology as a utopian means of democratization and its roots in older kinds of technological superiority and determinism. He suggests that two things—the movement of popular culture and the migration of “former colonial populations . . . to the centers of colonial power”—have led to a celebration of commodified hybridity largely replacing earlier fears about the homogenizing and imperialist effects of American popular culture (149). He also warns that old asymmetries have been replaced by new ones—that the “intensification” of movement and information creates new kinds of borders, despite the prevalence of public and academic discourse about porous boundaries (150).

Some of the most critically adept scholarship on transnational popular music has focused on the Pacific Rim. Shūhei Hosokawa (1997, 1999), Andrew F. Jones (2001), Tony Mitchell (2001, 2008), Christine Reiko Yano (2002), and Ian Condry (2006, 2012) have generated work that assumes interconstitutive relationships among music, multisited communities, and ideological formations. They show how these circulations are always defined by imperatives in the Asian-Western encounter. Writing about hip-hop in Japan, Condry (2006, 224n7) pushes against any assumption that it isn't "Japanese" by arguing that popular music can potentially mobilize principled globalized processes: "As Cornel West (2004, 22) says, globalization is inescapable; the question is whether it will be an American-led corporate globalization or a democratic globalization. The answer, of course, is that globalization is and will be both corporate-led and potentially democratic. This points us toward what is perhaps the more important question, namely, what kinds of social structures and motivations can drive democratic globalization? What kinds of organizing principles besides corporate capitalism can encourage transnational cultural movements? The early years of hip-hop in Japan offers some lessons." Using the Japanese word for "a place, a site where something happened," Condry offers "*genba* globalization" as a hip-hop-driven model for addressing how particular moments can "actualize . . . the global and the local simultaneously." As he puts it, *genba* globalization "reorients our attention away from culture flows from place to place toward questions of how global culture gains its force from the ways performances energize people in particular locations" (90).

Christopher L. Connery's (1994, 31) powerful overview of "Pacific Rim discourse," or the discursive construction of US multinational capitalism and the American right to expansionist trade, is essential to my understanding of taiko. He historicizes this practice as follows: "My argument, simply, is that the idea of the Pacific Rim came into being in the mid-1970s, that it was dominant in the U.S. geo-imaginary until the end of the 1980s, and that this dominance was determined by the particular stage of late capitalism marked by that period and by the economic and political situation of the United States in the late Cold War years." Connery argues that Pacific Rim discourse is distinctively different from earlier forms of orientalism because it is "a non-othering discourse" dedicated to rendering centers of power invisible (32). Shifting the discourse from nation-states to an ocean space meant that "the Pacific would be at its essence a noncolonial space where a pure capital would be free to operate" (40). When Japan became not only a regional but a global power, it was necessary for the US to think about the "transformative miracles" of capitalism in new ways (34). I add that Pacific Rim discourse also depends on a discursive deracination of exchange: as the center vanished, its racializing logic was also compromised and had to be reworked. As Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik (1994, 5) observe, "The promise is always there for a new, soft, more supple form of Orientalist knowledge and transnational control rephrased as a postmodern co-prosperity sphere."

The literary theorist Rachel C. Lee (1999, 251) asserts that Pacific Rim discourse is class based. She also notes “the reluctance of Asian Americanists to be framed as experts or apologists for the new ‘model minority’—the transnational Asian capitalist.” As she puts it, “Asian American critics do not simply resist globalization but decry a particular form of global-Pacific studies—one that triumphantly heralds the entrepreneurial Asian transnational class” and flattens the Pacific Rim into a deracinated, classless region of “exchange” (250). Connery (1994, 43) suggests that the celebration of this Asian transnational class addressed yellow-peril fears by constructing California and especially Los Angeles as emblematic of all that was good about Pacific trade, “flush with Asian capital influx and enlivened by the ‘new immigrants,’ largely from Asia (read: ‘good’ immigrants who have money and work hard).” Note that “the futurology of Pacific Rim Discourse” could be seen as a means of taking “conceptual possession of the entire region” (Wilson and Dirlik 1994, 5, 6).

In short, the models I find most useful for thinking about Pacific Rim exchange are not celebratory. Rather than broadcast a triumphant present-future of exchange unburdened by class, race, or nation, I ask who is served by the end of difference.

FIRST PASS: RACE, GENDER, AND SEX

The Mitsubishi commercial depends on some well-established if not tired tropes in car ads. Images of women are used to sell cars, though it is in no way obvious why sex should sell cars or why the images of these women should convince consumers to buy the Eclipse.

This ad was part of a broader Mitsubishi campaign, titled *Driven to Thrill*, which relied on a tangled mess of interrelated ideas about gender and race. The taiko commercial was the first of three focused on the release of two models, the 2006 Eclipse and the new Raider.⁴ It was meant to appeal to both men and women. One of the other ads (sometimes run back to back with the taiko ad) featured no human beings but rather images of non-Mitsubishi cars “bowing” in a Japanese manner to the Eclipse while parts of the taiko ad’s soundtrack were heard. The Raider ad riffed on filmic references to samurai wisdom, all drawn from stereotypical representations of “traditional” Japanese culture: images of Zen-like calligraphy and the claims that driving this car offers “the inner peace that comes from brute strength” and that “you must promise to use it only for good.”

The taiko players in the first Eclipse commercial are sexy and powerful, but how exactly does that come across, and what might sexy power mean to different viewer-consumers? If the web is any indication, the sounds and images of the women playing taiko made a big impression. Between 2005 and 2007, I did several searches for the words “Mitsubishi” and “taiko” and found site after site where wildly different virtual communities discussed the commercial. Most taiko players loved it; car aficionados thought it was stylish; TV-commercial fans were

enthused. The producer-curator of Estrogenius, an internet radio station devoted to women musicians, loved the ad's female strength and power.⁵ These diverse taste communities were oddly (though indirectly) connected.

Carla Freeman (2001, 1007n) has argued for "an integrated feminist approach" to globalization theory and has pointed out that both globalization as a process and globalization theory as a body of work have been gendered masculine. Women are "inserted" into globalized industries and processes as laborers, and studies of their participation in those industries become a kind of localized, ground-level, feminized theoretical work in marked contrast to macro theory. Mitsubishi inserted the female taiko players into the Eclipse ad in an astonishingly literal manner. The organizing structure of the commercial is quick cuts back and forth between images of the car and images of the taiko players.⁶ Two-thirds of the way into the sixty-second spot, the car and the taiko players are visually and sonically conjoined. The viewer can understand this in several ways: if you drive the Eclipse, you are therefore "like" those gorgeous and powerful women, or perhaps driving the car is "like" driving one of those gorgeous and powerful women. The ad thus works for both male and female viewers, straight or queer. The heterosexist male viewer can conflate the car and the women; the female viewer, whether straight or gay, can identify with the strong and sexy women/car. In this sense, the ad is clever, because it worked well for multiple viewers.

Sound and visuals are intensely interrelated in the ad. Easily understood, the minute linkages of what's seen and heard are technically accomplished. Sound engineering makes the car into a shouting, thrashing Asian woman. In addressing the problem of reiteration in great depth, the critical theorist Sheng-mei Ma (2000, xi–xii) argues that evocation is necessary in order to do away with orientalist stereotypes. He describes orientalism and Asian American identity as "symbiotic." An autonomous or authentic Asian American identity is thus outside the conditions of possibility because it is already defined by racist representation. The articulation between orientalism and Asian American identity is not predetermined, though familiar patterns may be followed. The Mitsubishi ad deployed established patterns. The commercial is technically breathtaking but dreadfully predictable. The taiko players invite being understood as submissive geisha or dragon ladies, the two stereotypes available to Asian and Asian American women.⁷ Butterfly and the dragon lady are both exotic and sexy, but in different ways. Butterfly is subservient, compliant, industrious, eager to please, and fragile, whereas the dragon lady is threatening, perverse, scheming, untrustworthy, and back stabbing—an exciting but untrustworthy dominatrix. The taiko players are no butterflies, and their assertiveness is not in question, so they must be dragon women. Besides, they're wearing red and are surrounded by torches that flare when they strike their drums.

The car and the musicians are not in the same place: the car has no visible human being in it besides a hand that shifts gears and a black shoe that presses the accelerator, and the taiko players are in a cavernous, dark hall lit by torches.

They're all young and incredibly fit. The "sound" of their playing links up with visual images at several key points—the opening torch flare, the closing of the car door, the doublehanded strike on the odaiko—but the audio track is heavily mixed down. The car drives along nighttime streets. A subtle but significant buildup extends over the sixty seconds: adding on musical parts creates a sense of increasing activity and excitement. At about the twenty-six-second mark, the sounds gel as Japanese festival music: they become *matsuri-bayashi* when an (unseen) *kane* and *shinobue* are added. The flute plays long sustained notes for the first twenty-five to thirty seconds and cranks into a busier and almost frantic mode after that. At the forty-two-second mark, the music stops for four crucial seconds: you hear the swish of wind as the car whooshes by, and then you see and hear one of the taiko players inhale and exhale through pursed lips, in profile, like an athlete. At that moment, you "know" that the taiko players *are* the car, because the sound of air (the sound of her body) has told you so. You barely have time to make that connection before the music starts right back up.

The taiko players' kakegoe are a key sonic element. The sound of their voices is first heard at the twenty-eight-second mark and is constant after that. Kakegoe are part of any taiko performance but in this case tie in with the long-established practice of using women's voices to eroticize commercials. Images of naked women were once woven subliminally into photographs of ice cubes in liquor ads, and the sounds of women moaning and gasping were similarly woven into the sound design of ads and film scores to create an (often subliminal) erotic effect. At the forty-eight-second mark, the car goes into a skid—a practice known as dragging or drifting in street car racing—and one woman's long, drawn-out scream picks it up sonically, reinforcing the overlaid identities (car-is-taiko-is-woman-is-car).

The images of the taiko women—or "taiko girls" or "Mitsubishi girls," as internet bloggers almost invariably called them—conflate tried and true images. The thigh- and (actually) ass-baring red costumes cite the cheongsam, the Chinese dress made famous by the actress Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzy Wong* (1960), always skintight and slit up the thigh. I was told that the ad's costume designer also did the costumes for the film *Chicago* (2002).⁸ Whereas Honō Daiko's costumes are designed to reveal the performers' upper-body musculature, these costumes deliberately evoke a predictable exotic erotics, effective because it is so familiar.

One could say that much of this is the stuff of generic sexist representation, but the Japaneseness of the car is not an afterthought—it's the core reinvention of the Driven to Thrill campaign. At one level, Asianness is visually and sonically evident everywhere in the taiko footage, but one shot makes it unmistakable. At the forty-second mark, a taiko player's eyes appear in close-up, and that image is a key visual trope, endlessly replayed in popular culture: the objectified Asian eye, usually shown as a body part unto itself, the iconic marker of Asian difference, the site/sight of Asian exoticism, inscrutability, and mystery. Once that split-second image appears, the ad is racialized beyond all discussion.

Gorgeously produced, the ad is a tour de force of its kind and depressingly easy to critique. I now step back to consider the car and taiko as exemplars of Pacific movement.

THE MITSUBISHI ECLIPSE

The anthropologist Sarah Lochlann Jain (2004, 71) argues that cars changed the American sense of self, writing that “the promise of a technology that would act entirely as a human prosthetic was crucial in consolidating a rational underpinning to a hegemonic kinematic social fantasy.” She shows how a series of twentieth-century tort law decisions situated cars as benign objects and bystanders as “random parts of the environment” (61). Her work illustrates how attitudes about the automobile have structured US social life, from the rise of the suburbs to the death of public transportation. Following Jain, I view the car as a distinctively ethnicized (White American or Japanese) prosthetic that creates the terms of possibility for “culturalized” value mobilized in a circuit of desire via a particular set of links across the Pacific Rim. I do not describe this movement as open ended, because I think the so-called Mitsubishi girls are compelling precisely because of the specific histories of (Japanese) cars in the US—from Detroit to war to occupation to economic miracle to globalized industry. The car makes the taiko players sexy and powerful rather than vice versa, through a specific series of mobile fantasies.

The movement of Japanese cars into the US began in the 1970s and expanded in the 1980s. The American auto industry declined in the 1970s because of rising gasoline costs and more stringent federal emissions regulations. “Buy American” had specific meaning in the 1980s, and driving a Japanese car in certain parts of the US was asking for trouble then. Japanese-owned US-based manufacturing plants created tensions in the Midwest, especially around Detroit, where local economies were heavily dependent on the auto industry. Honda was the first Japanese company to assemble cars in the US when it opened a plant in 1982 in Ohio. That same year, twenty-seven-year-old Vincent Chin was beaten to death with a baseball bat outside a Detroit bar by two unemployed White auto plant workers who assumed he was Japanese. Tensions between Japanese plant managerial staff and American workers was reflected in films like *Gung Ho* (1986).

Most of the leading Japanese automobile manufacturers now have US-based production, and Mitsubishi is no different. However, Mitsubishi Motors North America was in serious financial trouble in 2004–5: according to various sources, it had been losing money steadily, and it was described as Japan’s only unprofitable automaker. US managers and executives started leaving the company in fall 2004, and by February 2005 it was close to a decision to seek a buyer for its US operations (though its management denied this). In a somewhat desperate move, Mitsubishi hired a veteran executive named David Schembri to lead its US marketing operations. The company was widely regarded as “Japan’s only unprofitable automaker,”

having lost an estimated \$470 million during the final three months of 2004 (Szczytny 2005). In May 2005—right in the middle of production for the Driven to Thrill ads—the two head executives of marketing and strategic planning resigned over differing opinions about how to market the 2006 Eclipse.⁹ Twenty-five million dollars was budgeted for its campaign—not regarded as very much when the car was supposed to create a comeback for the company.

The Driven to Thrill advertising campaign for the Eclipse and the Raider was American in multiple ways: the cars were designed for US consumers and manufactured in the US, and the campaign was created by BBDO, a New York City-based ad agency. As the journalist Paul A. Eisenstein (2005) writes,

In an unusual move, Mitsubishi launched the new Eclipse three weeks earlier than originally planned. The debut was backed by an aggressive ad campaign during “finale week” on network television, when most series wrap up for the summer. The catchy Eclipse spots marched to the drumbeat of a 2000-year-old musical form called Taiko, which some liken to “rolling thunder.” Whether the car will connect with consumers is unclear, but the ads have been among the most highly ranked in recent months, AdCritic.com declaring [them] among TV’s most popular.

Ironically, there’s more than a little irony to the Mitsubishi campaign. It’s designed to underscore the Japanese heritage of the Eclipse, but the coupe was actually designed in California, is being built at Mitsubishi’s assembly plant in Normal, Illinois, and won’t even be sold in Japan.

The logic of globalized marketing is such that this isn’t ironic at all but rather the status quo in a denationalized free market designed for First World exchange. In fact, automobiles have long been hybrid material objects, with different parts made in different nations and assembly done somewhere else. Yet this ad campaign played up Mitsubishi’s Japanese character, which raises the question of where that Japaneseness is located. The distinction between deterritorialized international markets and soft-power cultural exchange is less clear than some scholarship would suggest, and the roles that Japan inhabits as a First World economic and financial center *and* the source of a massively exported popular culture create odd confluences (as the second paragraph of Eisenstein’s review suggests). The Japaneseness of the Eclipse is based on a set of carefully maintained (and sometimes carefully denied) associations. Nonetheless, Japan was frequently if not automatically cited as the most important signifier in the Driven to Thrill campaign.

By contrast, the muscle cars of the 1960s were self-consciously American and were created by putting big engines into (relatively) small cars, at a price that a working-class man could afford, and almost always in American-made models. One can certainly read big American gas guzzlers against the small, efficient Japanese imports in gendered and racialized terms, but I am more interested here in considering the Driven to Thrill ad campaign as an exercise in racialized transnational movement. Mitsubishi was struggling against falling sales and was in dire

need of a new concept. It had long been at pains to downplay its Japanese associations, but the Driven to Thrill campaign did the exact opposite. A *Detroit News* article—and note the paper’s location, in the heart of Motor City—addressed the implicit American-Japanese tensions embedded in the campaign:

Struggling Mitsubishi Motors Corp. is hoping to win back lost ground in the American market by turning its Japanese roots into a selling point.

“While our competitors are kind of hiding from the fact that they are Japanese (we want) to celebrate the Japanese-ness of our brand,” said Dave Schembri, head of sales and marketing for Mitsubishi Motors North America Inc. “If you want the American story, we have that as well.”

Speaking at a press event in Romulus marking the launch of its new Raider pickup—which will be built in Warren—Schembri said Mitsubishi’s marketing research shows that most Americans associate Japanese products with quality and value. So, while other Asian automakers try to hide their overseas origins by promoting their made-in-America products, Mitsubishi is peppering its advertisements with sumi brushstrokes and taiko drums. It is all part of an effort to ride the wave of “J-cool”—a love affair with all things Japanese, notably comics, video games, and animation—that Schembri compares to the British invasion of the 1960s.

Not everyone is convinced it is a good idea.

“It’s controversial,” said Jim Sanfilippo, senior industry analyst with AMCI Inc. in Bloomfield Hills. “I’m not sure what value that has with the American consumer.” (Hoffman 2005)

In the first week of October 2005, the next part of the Driven to Thrill campaign focused on the Raider and also drew on Japanese pop culture themes, though more subtly than the Eclipse ad. An article on *Brandweek.com* described the Raider TV commercial:

Dave Schembri, [executive vice president of] sales and marketing, said the campaign for the truck will follow a theme established by the spring launch of the Mitsubishi Eclipse sport coupe. That campaign, which juxtaposed female Taiko musicians pounding drums with shots of the car, was meant to invoke the spirit of Japanese popular culture.

Schembri said the new effort, via BBDO West, will posit the truck as a samurai-type good guy with the truck facing off against another truck in the desert. He said the drummers wouldn’t be visible, but that the drumming will provide the soundtrack. “After the Raider does maneuvers in the sand,” said Schembri, “another truck on a hill faces off with it.” (Greenberg 2005)

Print ads used the text “You must promise to only use it for good,” as if the truck were a magic weapon given to a hero. A review of the Raider on *Autobytel.com* questioned its Japaneseness, arguing,

The new Mitsubishi truck is about history. . . . As this Japanese automaker tries to get its sales wheels spinning again and rebuild its brand in America, the

Raider—Mitsubishi's first truck in more than a decade—joins an upgraded stable of models being advertised with the trendy, urban imagery of “J-Cool” (Japanese-cool), tribal graphics and *Taiko* music, an ancient and powerful form of Japanese drumming. Developing a new ad campaign—Driven to Thrill—that will run across its car, sport-utility vehicle and new truck lines, this Asian manufacturer wants to call forth its Japanese DNA and create a cohesive new image of its full product line that will appeal to more adventuresome buyers who set themselves apart from the crowd.

We came to beautiful northwestern Oregon to look beyond the pretty scenery, however, and to see beyond the urban hip of J-Cool and *Taiko* drums. We came to drive this new truck and assess whether Mitsubishi has forged an identity of its own with its rebadged Dodge Dakota. What we found was a sculpted truck designed to attract young buyers and fun-seekers. The 2006 Mitsubishi Raider brings to market notable features, such as a V8 engine and the ability to carry six, making it an appealing offering in a competitive and still-growing market.

On sale in late September, prices for the 2006 Mitsubishi Raider will range from below \$20,000 to around \$30,000. Mitsubishi expects that 65 percent of sales will be 2WD, 35 percent part-time 4WD and 10 percent full-time 4WD. As for its success, exact pricing and probable incentives will likely carry more weight than tribal graphics and *Taiko* drums. But, as much as Mitsubishi has high hopes for its new truck, this three-diamond marque has higher hopes to trump with its new product line theme—Driven to Thrill. (Mead 2005)

The Raider ads were unmistakably directed toward men (aired during sports programming and in any number of men's magazines), whereas the Eclipse ads were run for a crossover male and female market, for instance during reruns of *Sex and the City* on TBS and *The West Wing* on Bravo. The ad campaign adroitly managed the two key valences—and the two potential sources of tension—that any Japanese-associated auto company must negotiate. While its Asianness could easily be read as feminine and passive, its ads work on an odd assortment of heterosexual associations: the gruff masculinity of filmic samurai, the power of women playing drums, the world of good old boys who buy pickups, and the crossover eroticism of sports cars.

The Raider and Eclipse effort rode on yet another feature of the global economy at a turn of the historical moment: the control of the oil industry. Whereas the gasoline crisis of the 1970s was front-page news, the 2005 crisis-that-was-not-a-crisis, driven by the US occupation of Iraq (2003–11), got relatively little attention, due to a White House administration seated in the oil industry and centralized media control. A chilling, key component of the Driven to Thrill campaign was the “Gas comes standard” offer: a year's worth of gas for buyers of the new Mitsubishi models. In other words, the campaign effectively addressed two radically different aspects of the global economy: the rising gas prices resulting from the US military-industrial complex, and US corporate assertion of control over mass culture from Japan.

RACING CARS AND RACIALIZATION

Let's take the Mitsubishi Eclipse out for a spin in another direction: the West Coast import and compact street racing scene, where it is one of the most popular cars. Street racing exploded among Generation Y Asian Americans in the early 1990s.¹⁰ Asian American youth, viewed as wealthy, upwardly mobile, and aspiring to Whiteness, are immediately subject to accusations of privileged materialism. Asian American car culture is then racialized in ways parallel to how the African American emphasis on large fancy cars is racialized, which in turn activates tropes of big Black cars and small Asian American compact racing cars, both the objects of elaborate accessorizing and display.¹¹ The cars made by such Japanese companies as Honda, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Toyota, Mazda, and Subaru were the archetype of late twentieth-century Pac Rim movement. The First World success of Japanese cars has long been racialized, and their doubled role as sleekly accessorized prostheses for Asian American youths is thus striking and risky. These cars have strong associations: they are at once affordable, economical, and well made, and are often described as an "influx" (i.e., an infestation) into the Fordian dream of American automobiles.

Oliver Wang (2018) has explored Nikkei car clubs of the 1950s and 1960s, and the journalist C. N. Le (2005) notes that customizing cars has a long history in California. In the 1980s, Asian American youths in California started accessorizing and modifying compact imports for higher performance. The cars were part of a new public presence for young Asian American men that prompted anxieties. Informal nighttime gatherings in relatively deserted urban and suburban areas mushroomed into illegal street racing events that sometimes drew thousands of spectators and participants. Although the phenomenon attracted non-Asians as well, it is widely acknowledged that young Asian American men started the trend and continue to lead it (Namkung 2004). The size of the gatherings, some spectacular deaths, and suburban uneasiness led to massive police crackdowns that raised new fears about profiling young Asian men in general (compare Black men in accessorized cars).¹² In other quarters, the street racing trend activated old American worries about Asians as dishonest and undeservedly affluent: the accessorizing was often extremely expensive, and chop shops specializing in Japanese imports led to a rise in targeted car thefts.

Susan Kwon (1999) describes the import racing scene as uniquely Asian American and part of the long US history of ethnic-specific youth car cultures, such as White Americans with their hot rods and muscle cars and Latinos with their lowriders. Tracing the import scene back to Japanese American youths in Gardena in the 1980s, she argues that its subsequent pan-Asian American explosion was not a coincidence: "There are explicit ways in which Asianness is asserted in the Import scene. Most evident is the conscious choice to purchase and soup

up Japanese cars. The act of owning and buying a Japanese car is an act against the dominant white American ideology and patriotism. The slogans 'Buy American' and 'Made in America' are still strong today. Furthermore, buying a Japanese car [in the 1980s] was considered downright unpatriotic by those sympathetic to the American auto industry." She notes that many L.A. and Bay Area street teams chose names that were Asian or Asian sounding. Some teams were ethnic specific (e.g., Filipino, Chinese, Vietnamese), but most were pan-Asian American. Importantly, the scene explicitly constructed Asian American men as tough, streetwise, defiant, hip, and out in front of American popular culture rather than as model minority members or nerds.

The series of films that started with *The Fast and the Furious* in 2001 marked the move of drag racing into mainstream popular culture, and some Asian American youths saw it as an appropriation of their scene, not least because Asian Americans have minimal roles in the films despite their significant presence on the street.¹³ The journalist Kimberly Chun (2001) noted that *The Fast and the Furious* makes Asians and Asian Americans into the villains and wondered whether this decision was "some kind of holdover from the American vs. Japanese auto industry wars." Interestingly, the White hero (Paul Walker) drives a 1995 Eclipse in his first street race. The first two films revolve around urban environments with markedly multiethnic street racing communities. The Los Angeles streets in the first film are depicted as heavily Black and Latino and give way to Asian American space only when the protagonists follow the Vietnamese villains into Little Saigon in Orange County. Rick Yune plays the lead bad guy, Johnny Tran, but is actually Korean American. The second film is set in Miami, and only two Asian Americans spend any time on the screen: MC Jin, who has a supporting role as a mechanic, and Devon Aoki, as the sole female driver (and eye candy for the audience). *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003) features another emcee, Ludacris (also in a supporting role), and the third film features Bow Wow: hip-hop artists of color were inserted to create a sense of street authenticity. The issue of Asian American presence took an interesting turn with the third film, *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006). This was the introduction to blockbuster action franchises of Justin Lin, a young Asian American director previously known for indie films (e.g., *Better Luck Tomorrow*, 2002). Despite Lin's declared commitment to nonstereotypical Asian characters, the plot involves Yakuza links and the Tokyo underworld. During the casting period, Asian American Film's website posted this summary:

The film is about an obsessive street racer named SHAUN who is exiled to Tokyo after annoying the local police once too often.

SHAUN is treated like an outsider and mocked for being a gai-jin. He is drawn to the subculture of drift racing, a dangerous and sometimes deadly sport that he masters with startling speed. In the process, Shaun makes a deadly enemy and meets the love of his life, Tani.

TANI is a stunning Japanese girl who attends the same school as Shaun in Tokyo. When they interact at first, she dismisses him until she realizes that he is an obsessive street racer as well. Chaos arises when Shaun finds out that she is in fact D.K.'s girlfriend (the "Drift King" of Tokyo). Shaun enrages D.K. by challenging him to a drift race, while at the same time forming a friendship with Tani, which eventually evolves into a forbidden romance.

REEVISE (A.K.A. TWINKIE) is a fellow classmate of Shaun, who is the first to befriend him in Tokyo. He too is car-crazy and drives a Nissan S15 Silvia. Initially Shaun is rude to Reevis, claiming "he doesn't need friends", but soon they develop a friendship as Reevis tutors Shaun on Japanese culture as well drift racing.¹⁴

The protagonist, as in the series's other seven films to date, is a young White American man, despite the call for a lead with no specific ethnicity: "SEEKING MALE ACTORS (any ethnicity) and JAPANESE FEMALE ACTRESSES: both must be able to play High School role." Asian American Film jumped on the possibility of actual color-blind casting: "FAST AND FURIOUS 3: TOKYO is casting lead roles 'color blind' and is looking for Asian/Asian American/Hapa male and females to apply for these lead roles. The process to submit is easy and involves a video tape. How cool would it be if FF3 was all Asian American!!! Damn!!!" But these hopes weren't realized: the lead role went to Lucas Black. To summarize, the first three films reflect a mainstream fascination with a phenomenon largely created and maintained by Asian American youths. Although they depict Los Angeles—the originating site of street racing—Miami, and then Tokyo, they pass over repeated opportunities to accurately represent deep Asian American involvement in the scene.

Coming back to the Mitsubishi Eclipse ad, those seconds right at the end when the car drags/drifts into a sideways skid and the taiko player's sustained kakegoe carries it further are thick with evocative association if you care to hear it and see it. Of course, it's part of a crass effort to appeal to the street racers who were already drawn to the Eclipse, yet it also summarizes (deliberately or not) the powerfully wrought social and material aesthetics of import cars and their authority in the hands of youths who take them past cookie-cutter factory extras and speed limits. The kakegoe re-Asian Americanizes that brief, brief second . . . even if it is wrapped in the deathly embrace of orientalist representation (Ma 2000). In yet another way, that second of Asian American sonic and visual representation is made hip through the mediation of J-cool, to which I now turn.

J-COOL

Somewhere along the way, both taiko and the transpacific circulation of cars became J-cool. Street racing is cool even if no Asian Americans are in sight. More than a few journalists have opined that Japan has become a cultural powerhouse in ways that evoke its former strength as an economic powerhouse in the 1980s

(e.g., Hoskin 2015). J-pop, anime, manga, Pokémon, and Hello Kitty are all major exports; American films from the 2000s like *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Lost in Translation* (2003), and *Kill Bill (Volume 1, 2003; Volume 2, 2004)* drew on the trendiness of Japanese popular culture; and the ubiquity of sushi and ramen restaurants in major cities are part of the phenomenon of Japanese hip, J-culture, or J-cool.

The writer Douglas McGray (2002) coined the phrase “gross national cool” in a *Foreign Affairs* article, suggesting that pop culture could become Japan’s next global industry. Describing Japan as a “cultural superpower,” he argues that “cultural accuracy is not the point. What matters is the whiff of Japanese cool”: J-cool is thus a Western-Asian mix of elements that reemerge as uniquely Japanese—and cool. McGray also suggests that the Japanese economic recession in the 1990s helped to generate the conditions for J-cool: as major corporations failed, some of the social hierarchies of the business world loosened up, allowing youthful entrepreneurs to rise quickly. He also argues for a political economy of mass culture (though he doesn’t call it that), which very few “globalization nations” have achieved: “In cultural terms at least, Japan has become one of a handful of perfect globalization nations (along with the United States). It has succeeded not only in balancing a flexible, absorptive, crowd-pleasing, shared culture with a more private, domestic one but also in taking advantage of that balance to build an increasingly powerful global commercial force. In other words, Japan’s growing cultural presence has created a mighty engine of national cool.” McGray posits that J-cool works because it speaks both to and beyond Japanese consumers, and in so doing creates new terms for conjoined economic and cultural success. However, he also attributes “soft power,” “the nontraditional ways a country can influence another country’s wants, or its public’s values,” to the success of McDonald’s, jeans, and Pokémon. Soft power like J-cool succeeds because it is attractive and pleasurable. The feminized force of soft power is such that it creeps into ideology and can be terrifically effective if it is exerted in tandem with the “hard” stuff of economics and military might. Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2004), who coined the term in the 1980s, writes that “soft power—getting others to want the outcomes you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them. Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. At the personal level, we are all familiar with the power of attraction and seduction. In a relationship or marriage, power does not necessarily reside with the larger partner, but in the mysterious chemistry of attraction.” As a former assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs in the Clinton administration, Nye is not offering a metaphorical means for thinking about power relations; he discusses soft power as a strategy used in US foreign relations to address everything from terrorism to the occupation of Iraq.

J-cool and Asian hip are pervasive in West Coast Asian American youth culture. While this demographic valorizes and consumes Asian-produced commodities,

something more than that is going on. A generation-specific exploration of Asian American identity is self-consciously, centrally part of it. The success of the Los Angeles-based *Giant Robot* is a case in point. With a long run, from 1994 to 2011, *Giant Robot* was a magazine that expanded into a store and a website. Its owner-editors (Eric Nakamura and Martin Wong) explained the magazine's purpose in terms that lay out a very particular Asian–Asian American relationship:

From movie stars, musicians, and skateboarders to toys, technology, and history, *Giant Robot* magazine covers cool aspects of Asian and Asian-American pop culture. Paving the way for less knowledgeable media outlets, *Giant Robot* put the spotlight on Chow Yun Fat, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li years before they were in mainstream America's vocabulary.

But *Giant Robot* is much more than idol worship. *GR*'s spirited reviews of canned coffee drinks, instant ramen packs, Japanese candies, Asian frozen desserts, and marinated bugs have spawned numerous copycat articles in other publications. *GR*'s historical pieces on the Yellow Power Movement, footbinding, Asian-American gangsters, and other savory topics have been cited by both academics and journalists. Other regular features include travel journals, art and design studies, and sex.¹⁵

While Nakamura and Wong offer no specific cultural or political rationale for their hip (rather than fraught) attention to both Asian and Asian American pop culture, Asiaphilia haunts that glamorous intersection. After a certain point, the subscribers to *Giant Robot* magazine were about 50–50 Asian American and non-Asian American, suggesting something we already know: non-Asian American youths assiduously consume Asian pop culture. Anime and manga have a huge White American youth fan base, largely of boys and young men.

The merging of US and Japanese cultural economies is especially evident in Gwen Stefani's brilliant, two-pronged efforts as a singer and the creator of a fashion line. In 2003 she began working on a solo album titled *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* (released in 2004) and founded L.A.M.B.—an acronym taken from the album title—a line of clothing. One of the album's songs celebrates the whimsical fashion sense of teenage girls in Tokyo's Harajuku area. This look draws together cuteness and ironic references to gothic, Lolita (rococo little girl clothes), and punk fashions, usually realized through layers and colors. In "Harajuku Girls," Stefani expresses admiration for this style and the girls who wear it, while simultaneously, in a perhaps inevitable elision of style, advertising, and content, promoting her own line of clothing, which isn't an accurate representation of the Harajuku style as much as it is an appropriation of its social aesthetics:

You're looking so distinctive like D.N.A., like nothing I've ever seen in the U.S.A.
 Your underground culture, visual grammar
 The language of your clothing is something to encounter
 A Ping-Pong match between eastern and western
 Did you see your inspiration in my latest collection?

Just wait 'til you get your little hands on L.A.M.B.,
 'Cause it's (super kawaii), that means (super cute in Japanese)
 The streets of Harajuku are your catwalk (bishoujo you're so vogue)
 That's what you drop

Although the song is narratively set up so that Stefani addresses Harajuku girls and expresses admiration for their clothes sense (and they “answer” at intervals in Japanese slang), it's really about Stefani's collection and *her* style sense in the end.

Further, Stefani accessorized herself with four “Harajuku girls” who performed on the 2005 Harajuku Lovers Tour in support of the album, as seen in countless promo shots. These four performers (three Japanese-born women and one Japanese American woman from L.A.) are positioned in much the same way in every photograph—arranged around and/or behind Stefani, who is always front and center—often wearing identical clothing and usually with impassive or pouting expressions. Groups of interchangeable, nonspecific, unnamed Asians is a very, very old trope (*The Five Chinese Brothers*, Jay Leno's *Dancing Itos*). Margaret Cho blogged that these women were just another minstrel show; she sarcastically flagged the problem of Asian American invisibility by adding, “I am so sick of not existing, that I would settle for following any white person around with an umbrella just so I could say I was there.”¹⁶ The Harajuku girls were stand-ins or mannequins for L.A.M.B., but in another way they are pure J-cool, pure style. They were Stefani's accessories. Her Harajuku Lovers fashion line, part of L.A.M.B., was sold through Urban Outfitters and online. In Stefani's hands, “Harajuku” became less a Tokyo neighborhood or a particular community of young Japanese stylistas than a conveniently floating signifier reclaimed as “her” line of clothing.

Stefani is a telling example of how Americans consume J-cool. Objects, people, ideas, and practices—including taiko—are imbued with J-cool and then put up for grabs; I question the processes through which they *become* unmoored and appropriate. All aspects of Asian culture are then subject to mediation through the lens of Asian hip. Cultural authenticity has always been a retreating horizon, and anything Japanese or Asian can be made hip. The aura of J-cool touches even “traditional” Japanese culture: the martial arts and taiko thus become J-cool when Uma Thurman kills Bill and when the Mitsubishi girls play the hell out of those drums.

The Mitsubishi girls' traditionality morphs into orientalism in the service of J-cool. But their traditionality had to be revamped for this to happen: their costuming and hairstyles in the ad were significantly different from what most of the TAIKOPROJECT performers usually wore, and were evidently meant to evoke anime, with the multisectioned, spiky updos and skintight, revealing, sci-fi, superwoman clothing of a certain type of heroine. A makeup and hairstyling team created this distinctive look for the taiko performers. In short, their costumes were reconfigured to evoke the cool of anime rather than to accommodate the more prosaic need to move and sweat.

PARTICIPATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, DISCLOSURES,
FORECLOSURES, INTERVENTIONS, GUILT

How can Asian Americans participate in the North American production and consumption of Pac Rim commodified culture without being cast in a minstrel show? Bryan Yamami was in the middle of the Eclipse commercial's staging, so his perspective is essential: he helped curate the taiko performers' participation and choreography. Yamami is one of the most energetic and visionary young taiko players in North America. He rose to a position of authority in the taiko world in the early 2000s, when he was in his twenties. In 2000 he was one of the founders of TAIKOPROJECT, a superbly skilled group of players mostly recruited from the collegiate taiko scene and thus young (in their midtwenties) and impressively skilled. Because he is a leader in the North American taiko community, Yamami's work and vision for taiko are important, and he has a strong sense of how taiko is tied to Asian American history and community.

Yamami told me that all the music for the ad was written by Stewart Copeland and prerecorded in the studio.¹⁷ In other words, none of the sounds heard in the ad's soundtrack were made by the taiko players seen in the ad, or perhaps even any taiko players at all—it's possible that they were all electronically generated. The magic of the studio means that we "hear" taiko but that those sounds have been radically modified or simply invented elsewhere. Taiko is notoriously difficult to record; if you remix the levels, the drums can end up sounding like tin cans. Yamami described the music as "fake taiko," and his job was to make sure that it looked like the performers were actually playing it. He felt that "the costumes were tastefully sexy but not overdone (no chopsticks in the hair or fake Japanese writing on them)." Some years later (in 2014), he told me that the ad was originally "scripted for all men in fundoshi" and the TAIKOPROJECT women were "bitter" about it. When the ad concept was changed to all women, he knew they were chosen for looks and not skill: though most were taiko players, some had been playing for only a few months. He was clear about his role in the ad: he was "a consultant," whereas a firm did the casting, used TAIKOPROJECT drums for the shoot, and asked Yamami "to teach hot Asian women actors to play taiko." He admitted that he had asked himself at different moments during the shoot what a "passable" level of taiko playing was, given the circumstances.

Yamami also told me that TAIKOPROJECT now frequently plays "high-end corporate gigs" and gets more recognition from theater presenters and festival producers thanks to its exposure from the Mitsubishi ad. I asked him what he thought of the ad's final version and how he felt about having been involved with it. He answered,

I think it turned out very well, and I am proud that I was a part of it. I think one of the things I'm most proud of is that the group looked very, very strong, when in reality only a few of the girls were really experienced taiko players. Many of them

were UCLA students who were “good-looking” but had little taiko experience and not-so-solid basics. Most of the girls stepped up and took direction well, and with the shortness of each taiko clip it all looked strong and powerful. I think the girls are happy with how it turned out.

While two of the performers were quite advanced, most of the musicians were inexperienced, but this isn’t evident in the ad, since each shot is no longer than a second or two.

I will now circle in even more closely toward the ethnographic center of Asian and Asian American hip. I obviously have grave doubts about whether it’s a good idea to go in up to your elbows, but refusing to participate isn’t the only possible response either. I can’t demand spaces of unsullied political will and representational control, because no such spaces exist. The political economy of Pacific Rim mobility makes accountability a moving target.

What I haven’t yet revealed is that I played my own small part in the Mitsubishi commercial. No, I’m not in it; rather, I had a walk-on role in the early stages of casting and conception. Here’s what happened. On Saturday, April 2, 2005, two weeks away from the big annual taiko concert at my home campus, the University of California, Riverside, Satori Daiko had an extra rehearsal at Sozenji Buddhist Temple, Rev. Tom Kurai’s temple in Montebello, California. I was deeply and intensely involved in Satori Daiko at that point, and hosting the full-length evening taiko concert at UCR was one of my contributions. UCR’s collegiate group Senryu Taiko had agreed to meet with us that day to go over the program and to show us their pieces, to be followed by a potluck so the two groups—one primarily from the Japanese American community and the other from a university—could spend some downtime together. About twenty-five of us were there. Rev. Tom announced that two members of a local production company would visit that afternoon to audition anyone willing for a car commercial that would soon be shot in Los Angeles.

When they arrived, we all sat in the temple pews to hear them explain what they were looking for. They both appeared to be White, a man and a woman, both very confident, both enthusiastic but slightly condescending in the way that Hollywood industry workers often are with outsiders. They explained that the commercial was for the Mitsubishi Eclipse and that the concept involved taiko. The man had brought a series of charcoal storyboards, and he walked us through the plan for the commercial with great satisfaction; it was clear that he expected us to be thrilled and excited. He provided a dramatic narrative as he went through the storyboards one by one. The first showed a series of men playing odaiko in V-formation, all nearly nude except for fundoshi and hachimaki, all seen from the back. In the center was a very large odaiko with another man in front of it, arms raised. These men were from either Ondekoza or Kodo: the costuming and the emphasis on odaiko are emblematic of these groups in taiko circles. The man from

the production company didn't acknowledge the players as members of group, and as he went on, it was clear that he regarded the taiko in the ad as generic rather than a specific piece by a specific group. The next storyboard showed part of the Eclipse—a headlight and part of the hood, I think—and then “shot of taiko,” as he said, then (next storyboard) “shot of car” (a tire), then “shot of taiko” (a muscled back), then “shot of car” (pistons or some other engine part), then “shot of taiko” (hands holding bachi), and so forth. He explained that taiko would be heard throughout all this, working up to a thunderous crescendo. He enacted this with a flourish, flipping through to the final images and ending with a satisfied “Boom!” We applauded on cue. The woman then explained that they wanted to audition “Japanese men” for the commercial, that they wanted to videotape the auditions, and that getting paid would involve signing away rights to the material. Both gave every indication that they were doing us a huge favor. I had been simmering from the moment when I realized they had no idea that they were ripping off Ondekoza's or Kodo's work, and I went into a silent rolling boil when they announced that they were interested in auditioning only “Japanese men.” You simply don't want to get on the wrong side of me when it comes to the old confusion between Asians and Asian Americans.

I was also in high gear because members of Senryu Taiko were present. I would have been irritated had only the members of my own taiko group been there, but the presence of the undergraduates raised the stakes for me: as their faculty adviser and an educator, I didn't want them to learn that compliance is the only possible response to the racism of the entertainment industry or, indeed, the world. I was also aware that Rev. Tom might be interested in the gig as a professional opportunity, so I didn't want to estrange the visitors either. I raised my hand feeling quite conflicted—annoyed but determined to be diplomatic, reminding myself to try to work toward constructive change. I told the production team that their concept was drawn directly from a Kodo composition and asked whether they had approached Kodo to be in the commercial. They looked confused and said no, that it would be too expensive to hire a Japanese group or to shoot in Japan, since the commercial was for Mitsubishi's US branch. I pressed on and asked whether they would consider auditioning women. Knowing where I was headed, Rev. Tom told them (mildly, not confrontationally) that about 75 percent of all taiko players in the US are women. The team looked surprised and a little interested. I said not only that they should audition women but that they needed to rethink their decision to consider only “Japanese” performers, because there were only a few Japanese taiko players in Southern California but tons of Japanese Americans and Asian Americans. The team started to look defensive. They could tell that I was on to race, and they didn't want to go there. Furthermore, I said, some of the best players around were of mixed ethnicity or even not Asian at all, and using American taiko players should result in a more accurate picture of the US taiko scene.

By then I couldn't hide the fact that I was pissed off, and this was definitely not the right way to go about making an intervention, because the woman from the ad agency came back with exactly the kind of defensive answers that infuriate me: they had gotten their instructions from above, they thought we *wanted* to audition, and besides (wait for it), she herself had some Native American ancestry, so she was totally sensitive to these issues and had no problem with this ad, which was going to be "very respectful." I said that surely they knew they might need to adjust to the situation and surely it wouldn't be the first time that concepts shifted during production? She looked at Rev. Tom and told him that they were under some time constraints and that they had come because they thought people were there to audition. Rev. Tom handled this nicely: he asked whether we could have a few minutes to discuss the matter among ourselves, and he invited the two of them to wait in the foyer.

I wish I could tell you that we rallied and presented a united front, but we didn't. We had a good discussion that lasted about half an hour (long enough that the woman from casting stuck her head in the door at one point to ask whether we could move it along). One member of my group, a Japanese American man who wanted to audition, asked whether it could just be a matter of individual choice whether anyone auditioned or not, and Rev. Tom said yes, but that it was still worth talking about. Two Asian American guys from the student club childishly asked if they could just go audition because they were hungry and were eager to start the potluck. (Other members of the club shushed them.) A multiethnic teenage girl in my group voiced her displeasure that they were auditioning only men, because she really wanted to audition. One of the codirectors of the student club, a multiethnic Japanese American woman, said that she had doubts about the commercial because the casting team didn't seem to know anything at all about taiko. Another student—a young White American woman who had been listening to everything intently—said that the concept for the commercial seemed centered on an idea of Japan that had nothing to do with US-based taiko, and she felt the most appropriate solution would be for them to show a group of American performers who were both men and women of different ethnic backgrounds.

To my own discredit, I didn't moderate the discussion in the way that I'm trained to do and in fact am reasonably good at (at least in a classroom setting). I may have started the whole conversation, but I had a failure of nerve, due partly to the lines of authority in our group: I wasn't sure whether I was ruining an opportunity that Rev. Tom was still hoping to get. Conversely, I was dismayed by the willingness of so many of the taiko players to simply accept the terms as given. Having to take on *both* the representational might of the entertainment industry *and* the apparent eagerness of some of my colleagues to participate in it sent me into a tailspin. The casting team came back in without being invited, saying that they were running out of time, and they ended up getting their way: they auditioned only men who appeared to be Asian, and the rest of us—women; non-Asians; hybrid, inauthentic mongrels—started the potluck.

Of course, you already know that the final version of the commercial features only women, and all of them California-based women of Asian descent. So what happened? Did our conflicted intervention make a difference? Somewhere along the way, the production team started thinking about gender. Most likely, they noticed that they were encountering some fabulously good-looking Asian American women taiko players and went with them. I don't know exactly what happened, but I have access to the outer ends of the story—from audition to finished product—and I turn now to an analytical through line for both the production and the reception of the Mitsubishi ad, and indeed for this entire book.

TAIKO IN THE PACIFIC RIM THEATER

Taiko is not exempt from late capitalism. I have moved through three ways of looking at and understanding the Mitsubishi commercial. I began with the ad itself—its sounds and images—and then reflected on the globalized economies that led to the concept of the Pacific Rim and the critical response from cultural theorists to its late capitalist formation. I then unpacked the associations that Japanese import cars have for Asian Americans, focusing on economies of violence and reclamation for which cars are quite literally the vehicles. Finally, I addressed the ground-level participation of taiko players in peopling the ad with stand-ins for Pacific Rim exchange. I chose to start with the spectacularized object and then read the most particular and the most ethnographic, ground-level details of what happened.

I'm circling around my own disquiet about the ad, which has had an astonishingly long afterlife on the internet. At the World Taiko Gathering in Los Angeles in July 2014, Bryan Yamami spoke on a panel about collaboration in taiko that focused in large part on what it means to appear in entertainment industry productions. Looking back on his role in the Mitsubishi commercial of nine years earlier, he admitted that he had "gotten a lot of flak" about it from taiko players over the years, but he was still inclined to take the call if and when the phone rang.¹⁸ An audience member asked Yamami whether he had had second thoughts when TAIKOPROJECT members were told to wear ski masks in the 2012 music video for "Up in the Air" by Thirty Seconds to Mars. He responded, "[That video] got eleven million views! We'll never get that many on our own. If we have less control but lots of exposure, it still makes people get interested in taiko. If I have to put on a ski mask, to me, that's great. There will always be criticism—the taiko community will always do taiko in its own way. Exposure has other benefits." I understand the glamour, allure, and power of the long-lived tropes in the Mitsubishi ad as well as any other twenty-first-century American. Yet the critical effort of progressive understanding can create another set of responses. Still, learning new critical tools for antiracist, antisexist, antisubordination interpretation doesn't necessarily free you from the other interpretive tools that you absorb as a member of US culture.

I experience the thrill of watching those sexy women play, and I am seduced into wanting to look like them, to be desired like them, and to be powerful like them. Such enculturated responses kick in, inevitably, like well-oiled machinery, but my other habits of watching with critical awareness start up at the same time and then keep running, like overlapping newsreels. It's noisy inside my head.

Any Asian American practice is subject to instant commodification, and any Asian American practice is imbricated with globalized orientalism. When Asians are racialized through global corporate capitalism, any Asian American space is rendered inauthentic. The entertainment industry ensures that any kind of critical accountability is diverted and obscured; everyone is complicit, or *made* complicit. Interventions are folded back into the master system of representation. Neither Yamami nor the taiko performers in the ad were sellouts or unwitting victims, and obviously I am dissatisfied with my own inadequate role in the whole business.

For me, the final blow was learning that *we don't actually hear those musicians in the ad*—they literally move to someone else's beat, someone else's idea.¹⁹ In this book, I have argued repeatedly that the tumultuous, intrusive sound of taiko is central to its power—literally, metaphorically, and politically. But some of our choreographies are driven by music not our own. Transnational movement means that sites of cultural production are more complicated than ever. Whatever might be “our own” must be constructed in mindful and critically informed ways. Any oppositional stance will be already compromised unless we build in dialogical awareness that that is unacceptable. Our strategies for participation must be as mobile as the ideologies that move us into position as performers. I have argued elsewhere that consumption is a kind of cultural production (Wong 2004, 257–97), but I am now less certain that it is a game-changing response to the absence of an Asian American public sphere. We will need better critical tools for thinking about how to live in a society that valorizes unfettered mobility and consumption.

The Pacific Rim was named and defined by legislators and representatives of transnational postindustrial corporations who wanted to ensure easy access to new markets. It is evidence of the desire for a market as unencumbered as possible and exemplifies the neoliberal logic of unrestrained capitalism. North American taiko moves around the Pacific Rim in nonarbitrary ways. Taiko sometimes does radically performative cultural work, but since the 1980s the cultural space of the Pacific Rim has created terms for troubled Asian and Asian American encounters. Asian American taiko players are continually positioned to reiterate old ideas in hip new ways.

Transition

How to Leave a Taiko Group

You're thinking about moving on from your taiko group, for any number of reasons. Perhaps you no longer like its personality or character, or you feel undervalued, or you've had a falling out with someone, or you just need something different—you need to grow.

This is a primer of best practices. I didn't do any of these things.

You should try to fix what's wrong before taking the extreme measure of leaving, because building up all the rewards of belonging to any taiko group takes time. The longer you are in a group, the better you will know its repertoire, will appreciate the nuances of its teaching and learning style, and will earn the trust and respect of your colleagues. Most important, it takes time to create the bonds of affection that make good taiko groups great: ideally, a taiko group feels like a family.

Most likely, *you* are the thing that has changed. Ideally, you still value and respect what your group has given you, but you want to develop in ways that aren't possible in this group. You have longings, or the opportunity to join another group has appeared. How can you exit without burning bridges? How can you seize the chance to grow with another group but not leave behind strained feelings and a circle of people who suddenly feel discarded?

I hope it is possible for any North American taiko player to experience the joys of playing with more than one group in their lifetime, to see how different each group is . . . but also to see how “the taiko spirit,” that ineffable thing, manifests in different groups. I imagine all taiko players would want to maintain good, respectful, and productive relationships with every group and teacher they have ever worked with. Ideally, each experience will lead to more ways that you are part of the taiko community and more ways that you are one node through which others connect. Community is accumulative. You should try to maintain relationships even after you have moved on.

So you need a change. First, you should start by speaking one-on-one with the leader(s). Explain your situation. Don't revisit grievances. Emphasize how much you have learned and how your respect for the group has only grown over time. Explain that your need for new kinds of personal growth motivates you at this point. Ask if there is anything you can do to ease the transition (e.g., delaying your departure).

Second, there are several ways to change your status in the group:

Make a clean exit—that is, say your good-byes and remove yourself from the roster, stop paying dues, and so forth.

Take a leave of absence, ideally with agreed-upon dates of departure and return.

Agree to be in two groups at once: stay with the original group and begin working with another one. This should be done only with the explicit agreement of both groups and an open understanding among all parties.

Whatever you choose, let the rest of the group know, both in person and in writing. Tell everyone at once if you can, in a group meeting, so no one feels outside the circle. Emphasize how much you value them and desire to maintain ties. Follow up with a letter given to all members of the group, reiterating these things and thanking them for the good times and friendship you experienced with them.

Leaving should be about the importance of continued good relations with the original group and making this a priority no matter what the circumstances. If things have been unhappy, rise above it. Focus on what's been right. Set the stage for a different relationship by making sure your old one is sound.

I didn't leave Satori Daiko. I simply got caught up in burgeoning midcareer responsibilities and told everyone I needed a leave of absence for the three years I would be a department chair at my university. Somehow, I never went back after those three years. During the time I was off, other Satori members drifted away. The teenage members went to college and the family groups at the heart of Satori dissipated; without their daughters at practice, the mothers stopped coming. Others wanted new opportunities. A major break occurred when the Taiko Center of Los Angeles's other performing group, then called Shinzen Daiko, formally separated from TCLA and regrouped independently as Yuujou Daiko. At the time of this writing, Satori Daiko still exists but is much smaller, and most of the members I spent so much time with from 1997 to 2009 are no longer in it. I went back to the group once, for an epic performance with the Yellow Magic Orchestra and Yoko Ono at the Hollywood Bowl in 2011. It was one of those all-hands-on-deck moments, and I played Rev. Tom's piece "Aranami" with about fifty other TCLA members.

I was longing for something. I was deep into writing this book, and I could no longer avoid my need for a kind of taiko that addressed my most urgent hopes. I wanted to play taiko or simply be with other Asian American community-based performers who had already come to consciousness—who were woke, in Black

radical terms. I sought out those kinds of taiko players and Japanese American community workers. I attended PJ Hirabayashi's TaikoPeace workshop at Senshin Buddhist Temple in L.A. I went to the East Coast Taiko Conference and followed around the members of Raging Asian Women—an all-woman feminist Asian American taiko group—like the star-struck fan I am. I had long, intimate, and inspiring conversations with Karen Young, who founded the Genki Spark, another all-woman feminist Asian American taiko group, in 2010. In 2013 I began to follow Nobuko Miyamoto's community-building project called FandangObon, and I am now deeply involved in it. I gradually got quite serious about bon-odori, realizing that it exemplifies a lot of the things I valued most about kumi-daiko.

I'm ready, willing, and eager. I left but I haven't left. In the summer of 2017, Beverly Murata and I went to the twenty-third annual Taiko Gathering in the JACCC Plaza, where we enjoyed three hours of kumi-daiko performances, including a terrific thirty-minute set by Senryu Taiko, and then hurried over to East First Street, where we danced for two hours straight in the closing ceremonies for Nisei Week, the official end of Obon season in SoCal. As I danced to Nobuko, Martha Gonzalez, and Quetzal Flores's song "Bambutsu no Tsunagari," I was suddenly pierced with sadness—the season was ending, so I wouldn't get to dance this for another ten months, an eternity—and then I remembered that Nobuko would hold her fourth FandangObon Encuentro in October, in conjunction with the explosion of SoCal Día de Muertos events. And I was happy because I knew I would dance again, soon.