

Conclusion

Core Values

There's a joke at the end of the recording of "Bambutsu no Tsunagari" by Nobuko Miyamoto's longtime band of Japanese American and Chicana musicians and Rev. Mas Kodani, with whom Miyamoto has written quite a few new bon-odori songs and dances.¹ As the song builds to a joyous conclusion, the dancers take three steps inward so we're all looking at one another, arms upraised, and the recorded singers hit the final chord, "FandangOboooooonnnn . . ." It's a perfect ending. Then, after it seems like the song is done, you hear a little vocal tag. It's Rev. Mas. He's using his Issei farmer's voice—it's not his everyday Sansei voice but is gruff, in his chest. It's a memory, an evocation, an homage. He says, "Wha'? You wan' mo'?"²

What, you want more? You want to keep dancing? The North American kumi-daiko scene is changing so rapidly that I can't possibly bring this book to any tidy conclusion. This book reflects my love for and impatience with the taiko community. We tend to refer to "the taiko community," as if it were a collectivity with shared values. That moment passed around 2000, when taiko expanded rapidly and uncontrollably in North America and Western Europe. Like any community, it has always contained multiple, competing perspectives, but it has fractured further since 2010 or so. And yet—and yet. This far-flung "community" also has compelling values and ethical principles that are discussed, disseminated, and sustained in powerfully connected ways across the globe; they are explicitly articulated. For instance, in 2013, along with fifty other taiko teachers and practitioners representing a broad spectrum of age, ethnicity, gender, and region, I participated in three days of intensive planning for the new Taiko Community Alliance (TCA), including an entire day spent in a carefully democratic process to generate core values for the organization. With virtually no disagreement, the resulting list was "respect," "heritage and evolution," "empowerment," "inclusivity," and "transparency."³

I have encountered these core values many times before and since: they are constantly discussed, whether within or between taiko groups, and certainly at

the huge convenings that have marked North American taiko since 1997, when the first North America Taiko Conference was held. Naturally, the core values are discussed when disrupted or challenged, and such fissures are constant; still, no substantive change ever results. North American taiko has relied on established practices for creating collectivities of Japanese Americans and allied Asian American communities . . . until recently.

My personal disappointments are real enough. The taiko community doesn't like to talk about its own gender inequities. The majority of taiko groups are led by men, despite the fact that the majority of players are women . . . though this might be changing—we'll see. The acceptance of heterosexist hierarchy sometimes means that older men are automatically elevated to positions of authority and leadership. Deep habits of silence—despite the noisiness of our work—mean that we rarely call out orientalist practices even when confronted by them.

Rather than approach taiko as a quaintly folkloristic practice transplanted from Japan to the US, I have written about it as a deeply mediated bundle of representational fields that were (and are) constructed by war, global capitalism, struggles over First World ownership, fraught race relations, and so forth. These conflicts are particularly marked in Southern California. I love taiko, but my purpose lies in showing, again and again, how the ethnography of performance offers essential tools for living in a mediated environment of shifting authority defined by corporate centralization and community invention. I hope my approaches speak beyond my materials. I think ethnography-based methodologies could open up the political economy of any twenty-first-century music. This means attending to the political economy of the form, and this dimension has been missing from a lot of my previous work.⁴

This book is situated in the broader project of antiracist scholarship.⁵ It is not about race, ethnicity, and gender “in” taiko. My questions centrally concern these matters, but I hope that my critical emphasis on difference is so fundamentally attentive to them that they cannot isolate or contain my work. As Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein (2012, 3) state, “Prevailing conceptions of Asia conjure an eroticized space formed through desires and anxieties embedded in ‘the Western gaze.’” That was necessarily my starting point rather than where I have arrived. I paraphrase George Lipsitz (2014, 9), who paraphrases Ruth Wilson Gilmore, to say that this book is about “the fatal couplings of power and difference” that shape lives and slingshot drums across oceans, wars, and time. Ethnomusicology is overdue to focus its gaze routinely and unapologetically on such matters, in ways that would put us into more direct conversation with the best work in the humanities. I have not offered a comprehensive history of taiko, whether in the US, greater North America, Japan, or the world. This book provides a partial view of a huge phenomenon. I can no longer comfortably refer to taiko as “a” tradition, given its explosive expansion, multiple locations, and intensely mediated character. I finished this book at a point when the relationship between taiko and Japanese

American identity was/is no longer the dominant narrative. I am deeply uneasy about this change. Within the taiko community, I hear Japanese American and other Asian American practitioners declaring that taiko is “for everyone,” instantiating a radically open-door policy for this cultural practice.⁶ The traditional and the folkloric are deceptively available to anyone because their intermediation is concealed. As Masumi Izumi (personal communication, April 30, 2018) suggested to me, many Generation Y and even Generation Z Asian Americans in greater Los Angeles have diverse, transnational identities and comfortable class positions, making it difficult to generalize about the politics of the “taiko spirit,” because fewer are committed to taiko as an Asian American practice. North American taiko is unsettled, contradictory, pleasurable, frustrating, and slippery.⁷

Obviously, this worries me. As an ethnomusicologist, I have no desire to hold any music tradition in place or demand that it stop changing. Musics change and change again; never do they *not* change. But I wonder whether, over time, North American kumi-daiko will have fewer Asian American practitioners, and fewer students of any ethnicity who choose to regard it as an Asian American tradition. Such forgetting would be a triumph of the most predictable neoliberal multiculturalism. But I also see how kumi-daiko could be, and perhaps already is, a site where the growing White body politic can learn not just about personal empathy and feel-good encounters but about Asian American histories. As Angela Ahlgren (2018, 139) writes, “Taiko is deeply enmeshed with Asian American politics, consciousness, and identity,” right here and now, not in some distant past. The joy of playing taiko is a real start, but that feeling must be channeled into the struggle that antiracist work always is. Intra-Asian American kumi-daiko offers powerful strategies for antiracist coalition work, to which non-Asian American taiko players should commit.

This book is less celebratory than it would have been had I written it after one year or three years or five years of passionate involvement with taiko. I am both frustrated and inspired by taiko. I sometimes sound skeptical and even cynical in this book, because my hopes are so high. In some places, taiko does urgently important things for some Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans, both performers and audience members. Certainly it shows how community-based expressive culture complicates the “continuum between the poles of victimization and resistance,” as Lon Kurashige (2001, 389) puts it. But as the ethnomusicologist Louise Meintjes (2004, 193) warns, “A dance about power can become a source of power.” Having seen, heard, and felt how taiko can become a source of power, I feel an extreme alarm over some of its redirections. I am continually surprised and dismayed by what Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (2010, 3) calls “the popular appetite for Asianness,” which taiko players feed and satisfy even as they do progressive cultural work.

I write at a historical moment of political disaster, when the progressive Left is demoralized yet regrouping and many wonder what new and old violence, hate,

and hurt are coming our way. Immigrants both legal and less than legal are terribly vulnerable. White men march in the streets with torches. Nativism drowns out other voices. The pain and injuries of US history are not metaphorical right now, and the loudness of Asian American taiko speaks in a context of xenophobic noise. The insistent volume of Japanese American and other Asian American drumming is absolutely needed in this environment of real and present danger. This is no retreat to ethnic nationalism. Rather, I have shown in this book that taiko is an example of how racial projects appear from sometimes unexpected places and sources.

Lest it be thought that I overstate the power of Japanese American politicization, I note that the Japanese American Citizens League came out the gate loud and fast immediately after 9/11 and hasn't slowed down for a moment since then. As anti-Muslim (and anti-Sikh) violence followed hard on the heels of terrorism, the JACL defended civil liberties and stood as a moral reminder of where fear and nativism can lead. Since 2001, the organizers of the Manzanar Pilgrimage have annually included members of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in the program, ensuring that connections are made across history, memory, difference, and experience. In 2017 alone, the JACL issued numerous press releases and provided amicus briefs to the US Supreme Court opposing the Muslim-country travel ban, the end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, and the presidential pardon of former Maricopa County sheriff Joe Arpaio, an unapologetic anti-immigrant racist. Japanese Americans know how it goes down.

Taiko players too know the history and carry the memories. In 2016, Portland Taiko strategically revived an original musical-narrative piece titled "A Place Called Home," which depicts the Japanese American community before, during, and after the incarceration, highlighting the means to stand with and for vulnerable communities and building it into their public performances since then. Portland Taiko members have also rewritten their online bios to emphasize their personal immigrant histories.⁸ For the historic Women's March held on January 21, 2017, the Genki Spark director Karen Young worked with the taiko players Elise Fujimoto and Tiffany Tamaribuchi and generated the slogan "We Play for Unity. See Us Hear Us Join Us," meant to compel other taiko players to action (see figure 28, Karen Young wearing a "We Play for Unity" T-shirt, 2017, at <http://wonglounderandfaster.com>). Young (personal communication, October 28, 2018) said, "My activism and my commitment to community and empowerment have more than doubled since the election. I feel like I've just gotten started."⁹ Taiko tells a story about immigration, violence, resistance, and politicization. Taiko teaches skills that have urgent new relevance.

Taiko thus floods any space with news the world needs to hear.¹⁰ Community making that calls new collectivities into being is what taiko offers, right here, right now, at a moment when the Republic of California is organizing the resistance. Taiko is fatally part of commodity capitalism and all too susceptible to neoliberal

strategies of racialized containment, but it also provides the means to create a body politic that overruns attempts to fold it back into obedience and colonial fantasy. Its exuberance and discipline do not mask the pain. I have seen and heard its coordinated and improvised grace sweep through Asian American audiences, prompting tears, joy, memory, and determination. The North American taiko community articulates its core values in precisely the ways that the most powerful and effective political movements have articulated and mobilized new collectivities. Respect, heritage, empowerment, inclusivity, and transparency are exactly what's needed right now, and are exactly what taiko teaches.

I finish this book at a time when I have not actively studied taiko for some years yet still consider myself a taiko player. Performance is never only about performing. I have stayed closely in touch with the taiko world; I seek out taiko performances; I shout *kakegoe* when I listen to other people playing taiko; I dance *bon-odori* and think of summertime as a series of Obon festivals. *Kumi-daiko* has carried a formation of ideas, values, beliefs, hopes, movements, and sounds across Asian America, and they grow louder and faster all the time, pounding together the pain and the joy.