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## ***Taiko* and the Asian/American Body: Drums, *Rising Sun*, and the Question of Gender**

**Deborah Wong**

### *Abstract*

*This essay addresses the Japanese tradition of taiko drumming as an Asian American practice inflected by transnational discourses of orientalism and colonialism. I argue that the potential in taiko for slippage between the Asian and the Asian American body is both problematic and on-going, and that the body of the taiko player is gendered and racialized in complex ways. Through a consideration of a scene in the film "Rising Sun" (1993), I address a key cinematic misrepresentation of taiko and its impact on the North American taiko community. I contrast imperialist American tropes that feminize Japan with the predominance of Japanese American and Asian American women who play taiko in the U.S., and I suggest that taiko has become a means for Asian American women to recuperate racist and sexist narratives in a deeply personal and physical manner that implicates the very definition of the Asian American woman's body. I argue that the sensual sounded body has moved through a series of historical constructions and emerges asserting new Asian American presences, recasting issues of cultural authenticity in the process.*

*Taiko* is an ancient tradition of drumming with Buddhist roots; it combines music and the martial arts, and it is both very loud and visually exciting due to the choreography—swinging arms, leaping bodies—that is part and parcel of the music. I focus here on issues of gender and race as explored through the transnational movement of *taiko*.<sup>1</sup> The majority of *taiko* players in the U.S. are Japanese American or Asian American; I got involved with it because it spoke to me as an Asian American, and I am concerned here with the cultural dynamics of race and ethnicity as they intersect with gender as vectors of difference. American audiences do not, however, necessarily see *taiko* in the ways that Asian American performers do. The potential in *taiko* for slippage between the Asian and the Asian American body is staggering. Paul Yoon has written about the ways that American audiences map the Asian (and more specifically the Japanese) onto the bodies that perform *taiko*, documenting White Americans who come up to Japanese American and Asian American *taiko* players assuming that they are Japanese, sometimes even trying to speak to them in classroom Japanese (1999). *Taiko* excites an expectation of the foreign in the White

American spectator, and I have played in altogether too many performances where this was precisely what was counted upon.

Let me offer an example: a scene from the film *Rising Sun*, made in 1993, starring Sean Connery and Wesley Snipes, directed and produced by Philip Kaufman, music by Toru Takemitsu, based on the novel by Michael Crichton. San Francisco Taiko Dojo appears in the fourth scene of *Rising Sun* (about six minutes into the film) playing their signature piece, "Tsunami."<sup>2</sup> The physical and sonic presence of the *taiko* players creates a stage for xenophobic anxiety over Japanese corporate conspiracy; their ominous strength completely pervades this key scene. The sound of the drums is a sonic path that draws the viewer into the party and into the entire framework of the film, wherein Japanese businessmen adroitly 'manage' their American counterparts with bicultural acumen even as they remain deeply, unknowably foreign, strange, and ruthless.

We have just seen Eddie Sakamura and Cheryl, the high-class White call girl, in her apartment; she's nude, sitting at her make-up table and watching the news on television. He's just stepped out of the shower and wears only a towel. She says, "I don't get you, Eddie," and, deadpan, he says, "So what." With the camera still on his face, faint *taiko* drumming suddenly wells up on the soundtrack for about two seconds and *bam*, we're into the next scene: three members of San Francisco Taiko Dojo on-stage, filling the screen. They're playing furiously: two young men wearing Japanese workers' aprons (*harakake*) without shirts underneath, and Tanaka-sensei, bare-chested. Cut away to White guests in black tie and evening gowns outside—two couples—climbing the steps outside a skyscraper in Little Tokyo; they're talking amongst themselves, reminding each other to "bow when you're bowed to." The camera pans up the front of the dark skyscraper, which is festooned with a banner reading "Nakamoto Towers Grand Dedication." Inside, the elevator doors open and when we see two geisha bow to us, we realize that we're seeing the scene from the perspective of the White guests. Again, they remind each other, "bow when you're bowed to," and they bow back to the geisha. They move into the crowd, which includes lots of Japanese men and lots of White American women. The camera lingers for a second on a group posing for a snapshot: three small elderly Japanese men in tuxedos with five beautiful White women standing behind them and towering over them. In the soundtrack, we suddenly hear a loud *kakegoe*, "Uhhhhhhh!" One of the new arrivals says to his friend, "*Taiko* drums!" His friend says, "Eh?" He leans over to explain, "*Taiko* drums! Long ago, they were used to drive away evil spirits." His friend says, "Oh," and the camera cuts back to the *taiko* group. Tanaka-sensei is now pounding on a metal bar, creating a fusillade of brilliant sound.<sup>3</sup> The camera cuts to Eddie Sakamura looking at his watch with an *odaiko* player in profile behind him who looks tremendously powerful. Eddie slips up the stairs. The sound of *taiko* continues, but a *shakuhachi* trill is laid on top of it, and the effect is suspenseful and a bit foreboding.

We're now in the boardroom, which is dark except for a few isolated floodlights. Cheryl is there; she says, "Come here," and a man (who we see from behind) grabs

her, lifts her, and she wraps her legs around him. The sound of *taiko* continues beneath increasingly foreboding *shakuhachi* and synthesizer sounds. Cheryl says, “No, here,” and gestures for the man to carry her over to the huge table that fills the room. From above, we see him plunge his face into her groin, but we still can’t see who he is; we assume it’s Eddie Sakamura. She’s moaning.

The *taiko* is suddenly loud and we’re back downstairs at the party: the face of a cocktail waitress fills the screen, staring at us, her geisha-like make-up making her seem all the more impassive. She pivots and the camera pans to the face of one of the White businessmen we followed into the party: he gazes at her and then looks aside in distaste.

The camera cuts full-screen to San Francisco Taiko Dojo on stage. The huge *odaiko* at center stage is now being played by a muscular young man. Cut to the Nakamoto CEO’s assistant, who is listening to something coming in on his earphone, hand cupped to ear, looking worried; ominous *shakuhachi* again, and he exchanges a significant look with the White assistant. Back to a full-screen view of the *taiko* group, and Tanaka-sensei is now on the huge *odaiko*: he stands in a frozen *kata* and then strikes, DON! (pause) DON! (pause) DON! Cut to a close-up of Cheryl’s crotch, and we see a flash of her pubic hair as the man rips off her underwear. She sinks back onto the table and he tears open her black dress; her breasts spill out and he begins to pump at her with her legs over his shoulders. “Come on,” she says. Full-screen, the *taiko* ensemble, to a close-up of Tanaka-sensei on the *odaiko*. We see him from the back. *Don don don don don don don don, doko doko doko doko*. Back to the Cheryl’s face under the spotlight, then a shot of the man from behind and her legs wrapped around him. “Yes,” she says, and he folds his hands around her neck. She’s moaning. Cut to a close-up of Tanaka-sensei from the back. Cut to the man’s hands around Cheryl’s neck as she gasps, “Yes, oh yes, oh yes, oh yes.” A phone ringing carries us sonically into the next scene as the camera cuts to Wesley Snipes answering the phone, and the sequence is over.

Tanaka-sensei is unstoppable—well, *we* know who he is, though to ‘the viewer’, he is just a generic *taiko* player. We never see the face of the man with Cheryl but the camera and the soundtrack have made it utterly clear that he is Japanese. The huge round face of the *odaiko* is visually analogous to the round spotlight on the boardroom table, and Tanaka-sensei’s spectacularly strong work on the drum amplifies (visually and aurally) the man’s work on Cheryl. It’s not terribly subtle: we see Tanaka-sensei from behind, we see the man from behind. The militarism, volume, and masculine strength of *taiko* = the man’s sexual conquest of the beautiful White woman. We get it. Tanaka-sensei’s muscled back and arms is the perfect eye candy for the trope of the martial: he is beautiful, invincible, and deeply threatening in his strength and perfection. The entire scene ‘works’ because of its reversal of a coupling more familiar to the American gaze, i.e., the White American man and the Japanese woman, popularized and romanticized in the 1950s through such films and novels as *Sayonara* (1957). As Traise Yamamoto has written, that interracial relationship was constructed as “somewhat acceptable—or at least safely titillating” (1999: 27) because it

acted out Japan's defeat in World War II in specifically gendered and ethnicized ways; the Japanese woman had at that point undergone at least a century's worth of Western construction as a "metonymic representation of Japan itself" (23) in need of rescue by Western men. In *Rising Sun*, the gaze figures the sexually aggressive and perverse man as Japanese via *taiko* (both its sound and its visual militarism). The White American woman receives the decidedly unsafe titillation of sexual congress with a Japanese man and more: he overcomes her in ways that could not be more menacing. We know, at some level, that this is an inversion of a relationship we would find satisfying if the ethnicities were reversed. In the film's denouement, we discover that we were mistaken: the White woman's lover was a White American senator. But we are also tricked, as it turns out that he didn't kill her—he was engaging in a consensual act of sexual asphyxiation meant to heighten her pleasure. In a clumsy and confusing scene meant to tie up the loose ends, we learn that a *second* man came in and finished her off—by strangulation—as she lay alone on the table recovering from her pleasure. He was Japanese! No, he was White American! But by then we are so wholly convinced that the Japanese assistant to the CEO has acted out of perverse, knee-jerk loyalty to the company that we hardly care when the White American assistant is thrown out of a skyscraper by *yakuza* into a pool of wet cement. We know who really killed her. Crichton has 'proven' that he's not a xenophobe by playing with ethnicity and nationality, but we've still gotten the point.<sup>4</sup>

And it was *taiko* that got us there. My teacher, Rev. Tom Kurai, says that that key scene in *Rising Sun* is a completely inappropriate representation of *taiko* despite San Francisco Taiko Dojo's fine performance; how could they know what would happen in the editing room? *Taiko* is visually and sonically constructed as both masculine and sinister: this particular confluence of gender and race presented through *taiko* is built up out of older tropes that 'work' because they are so terribly familiar. The (White) viewer of *Rising Sun* is clearly meant to understand *taiko* as a mimetic stand-in for Japan, and a masculinist, dangerous Japan at that. I am asking an old and difficult question: how can a single cultural form—*taiko*—be read in such completely different ways by different groups of people?

*Taiko* players tend to have opinions about that scene in *Rising Sun* and, as far as I can tell, Japanese American and Asian American *taiko* enthusiasts aren't alone in identifying the film's problems: *taiko* players generally (whether of Asian descent or not) focus on the *taiko* scene as a microcosm of the film's xenophobic narrative. As one *taiko* musician, Martha Durham of Austin *Taiko*, wrote to me,<sup>5</sup>

I saw the *taiko* scenes in the previews 7 or 8 times before the movie was released. So the racy encounter mix wasn't part of my first experience with the *taiko* scenes. When the movie was released and I saw the racy scenes mixed in, I was uncomfortable with those scenes, I thought the storyline was dark and negative.

Durham went on to say that the excitement of seeing San Francisco Taiko Dojo play in the film led her to take a *taiko* class and that she and her husband have been involved in *taiko* ever since:

Since many people have seen the movie, when I tell someone that I play *taiko*, and they get a blank look on their face, I ask them if they have seen *Rising Sun*. Many have, and they all remember the drumming more than the racy scenes that were mixed in with it. I have to think we can't be the only ones who were introduced to *taiko* by that movie, and even though the storyline scenes were violent, seeing *taiko* played was worth the viewing, and, in my opinion, a boost to awareness of *taiko* in this country.

Whereas Durham felt that *taiko* basically transcended the film's narrative devices, Tiffany Tamaribuchi, the director of Sacramento Taiko Dan, questioned the juxtapositions created in the editing room:

From what I understand SFTD was not aware that the footage was going to be intercut that way and [Tanaka] Sensei wasn't too happy about it when he found out.

Personally, I was disappointed with the movie and disappointed with the way in which the scene was presented. I think the scene with Kodo in "The Hunted" played much better, but in both of the movies Taiko seemed kind of forced in to the story line. Understanding that Taiko is very powerful and primal, I can see why the director might choose to intermix it with a sexually themed "murder" scene, but to me it seemed in poor taste and really kind of disrespectful to intercut the footage the way they did from the drumming to the sex to Tanaka-sensei's face to the sex, etc. I think this is in part due to the fact that I studied under Tanaka-sensei, but even still, just as a fan of Taiko it was just disappointing to see. Taiko has always been a very uplifting and spiritually moving thing for me. The scene didn't match my image of what Taiko is or what its potential as an art form is.

Kenny Endo (Director, Taiko Center of the Pacific) took a pragmatic approach to the matter, suggesting that intervention sometimes involves compromising:<sup>6</sup>

All of us in the music, performing arts, or entertainment business rely on getting gigs to survive. I talked to Tanaka-sensei during the filming of that movie and he was torn between the context that his drumming was used and the exposure that a major motion picture would give to the art of *taiko*. If he didn't do it, they would have asked someone else. I supported his decision and would have probably done the same had I been asked.

Roy Hirabayashi, managing director of San Jose Taiko, asked some very pointed questions:

[The film] was a very controversial issue when it was being filmed. The movie came out at a time when Japan bashing was at its peak. We were asked if we wanted to work on the film, but we turned the project down.

Did the movie help the "*taiko* movement"? It is hard to say.

Did the movie project *taiko* in the best light and image? No.

Did the movie continue to project a negative stereotype? Yes.

In short, *taiko* players' responses to the scene offer a range of indictments ranging from mild complaints that the framing narrative was "dark and negative" to more focused accusations of racist stereotyping. Loyalty to Tanaka-sensei is also quite evident in two of the four responses. All four perspectives suggest that *taiko* players have a strong sense for how representational practices can reframe and redirect

meaning in in/appropriate ways, even with a figure as iconic as Seiichi Tanaka. How far they are willing to critique or to assert control is another matter. As bell hooks writes (1992: 128), “While every black woman I talked to was aware of racism, that awareness did not automatically correspond with politicization, the development of an oppositional gaze.” hooks suggests that interventionist response can take a wide range of forms, from critical spectatorship to the creation of alternative texts to the maintenance of counter-memories, and that politicization may lie anywhere along the way. For *taiko* players, any politicized discussion of *Rising Sun* is too closely situated near Seiichi Tanaka, entangling matters of authority with questions of representation and thus creating a conundrum.

I now need to carry this matter of heterosexist stereotyping into a broader consideration of *taiko*'s intersection with the construction of Asian/American gender and its reading by audiences. The performance costumes worn by my group, the Taiko Center of Los Angeles, are specifically and authentically Japanese: *hachimaki* (headbands), *tabi* (sock-like shoes), bright Japanese shirts, and the kind of apron worn by Japanese craftspersons (*harakake*). I have moments of confusion, wondering why I have to become so Japanese in order to feel Asian American, and why the identity politics of our performances are so easily and consistently misread by audiences. Paul Yoon has addressed these issues through his experiences as a Korean American member of Soh Daiko in New York City, arguing that Soh Daiko (and any *taiko* group) presents all too many possibilities to audiences every time they perform (1999):

Within the context of the United States, Soh Daiko, and the music they play, Taiko, can be variously constructed (construed) as Japanese, Japanese American, or just Asian (Oriental), rather than or over and above being Asian American. Without complete control over perception, the members of Soh Daiko must contend with, work with, and/or manipulate numerous identities and assumptions, some favorable, others less desirable. For various audiences the music of Soh Daiko creates spaces that are conceived of as Japanese, Japanese American, Asian American, or Asian (Oriental) and in some of these cases these situations are directly counter to either their intentions or desires.

Yoon suggests that Soh Daiko relies on certain kinds of strategic essentialism (*a la* Spivak) to slip out from under the orientalist gaze, and part of me wishes this were as simple as it sounds. Reception is consistently under-theorized as a space filled with both risk and potential—the risk of misunderstanding, and the potential for activist response (i.e., intervention). Given the susceptibility of American audiences to orientalist pleasure—their willingness to give themselves over to it—I must ask what happens when performers think they are saying one thing and audiences hear something else entirely, and whose responsibility it is to redirect the reading. bell hooks argues for a performative recuperation of the gaze (1992), but I am not only interested in witnessing Asian American empowerment through spectatorship—I am fairly certain that that happens routinely through *taiko*, though I think its specific linkage to ‘the Japanese’ bears scrutiny.



How a single expressive practice can bear the weight of completely different interpretations is the conundrum: Asian American audiences willingly place themselves in the loop of the performative (they see empowered performers, therefore they feel empowered, therefore they *are* empowered), and meanwhile, non-Asian spectators shift easily into the orientalist gaze. Kondo addresses the ways that Michael Crichton used her monograph *Crafting Selves* to create a bounded, racist picture of Japanese culture in his novel and screenplay, and she reflects on how her stint as dramaturge for Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* helped her address the 'problem' of reception and its uncontrollability (1997: 250):

*Twilight* foregrounded for me the salience of the intentional fallacy, for authorial/dramaturgical intention could never guarantee meaning. In the case of Crichton's reading of my book, the intentional fallacy seems all the more fallacious, for authorial intention not only failed to guarantee meaning, but the text generated meanings antithetical to authorial intent. Once released in language, the subject-positions, histories, and (structurally overdetermined) interpretive schemas of readers and audiences shape reception. We can but do our best to anticipate certain overdetermined readings and preempt them, taking seriously authorial responsibility and attempting to do battle with the misappropriations of our work.

In short, authorial responsibility doesn't stop at the end of the book or the foot of the stage, but the key problem of how, then, to work against the uncontrollable and the overdetermined is the question.

Why are the majority of *taiko* players in North America women? In a cross-cultural context, it is extremely unusual for women to play drums, let alone to specialize in them, and it is even more unusual in the Asian traditional arts (with the notable exception of Korea). A significant number of Japanese American women (and Asian American women generally) are drawn to *taiko* for empowerment, and I don't think they do so in an attempt to map the masculine/menacing onto themselves. Rev. Tom frequently notes that the majority of his students are women—as many as three out of four, and this is true for many *taiko* groups in North America. Two of the leading professional Japanese groups, Kodo and Sukeroku, have a majority of men, but amateur *taiko* groups in Japan also contain large numbers of women, though not as significantly as in the U.S. and Canada. As Mark Tusler notes (1999: 6),

Since the establishment of *taiko* ensembles in the late 1950s in Japan, women have become increasingly active as *taiko* players. Kijima Taiko of Japan is all women. In North America it appears that more women play *taiko* than men; only 6 out of 25 performing members in the San Jose Taiko are men; approximately two-thirds are women in the Sacramento Taiko Dan, a group founded and led by a woman; the LAMT [Los Angeles Matsuri Taiko] is about even; Soh Daiko in New York City is approximately three-quarters women; the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, a group with around 30 to 40 members, appears almost even; and so on. The involvement of women in North American *taiko* drumming has played an important role in the development of identity for Japanese American women; gender has therefore been an important articulating factor for the continued success of *taiko* groups.

I would venture to guess that the qualities made threatening in *Rising Sun* are particularly attractive to—and transformed by—Asian American women: strength, control, loudness. Certainly these qualities speak to Asian American men in similar ways: given historical tropes that have consistently feminized Asian men (e.g., as addressed in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*), the strength and power expressed through *taiko* holds a particular performative appeal for Asian American men. Nevertheless, the overwhelming presence of Asian American women in North American *taiko* speaks to a certain reconfiguration of the Asian American woman's body and to a claim made on sonic and social space. As Mary Baba, one of my Japanese American classmates, suggested,<sup>7</sup>

The *taiko* is a very powerful instrument, it gives a feel of strength and command. In this day and age, even with opportunities for equality, women need outlets to feel power. Playing the *taiko* fulfills a need.

Baba's emphasis on "strength and command" is notable, as the transformation of the Asian/Asian American woman from a delicate, submissive stereotype to a figure capable of moving with power and authority is clearly the appeal. The struggle with silence is also addressed head-on through *taiko*, whether through the sound of the drum itself or through the realization of *ki* as *kagegoe*. Mitsuye Yamada (1983: 36-37) has written at length about the link between Asian American women's silence and invisibility, suggesting that stereotyping and reinscription are deeply entangled:

[W]e Asian American women have not admitted to ourselves that we *were* oppressed. We, the visible minority that is invisible. [...] I had supposed I was practicing passive resistance while being stereotyped, but it was so passive no one noticed I was resisting; it was so much my expected role that it ultimately rendered me invisible. [...] When the Asian American woman is lulled into believing that people perceive her as being different from other Asian women (the submissive, subservient, ready-to-please, easy-to-get-along-with Asian woman), she is kept comfortably content with the state of things. She becomes ineffectual in the milieu in which she moves. The seemingly apolitical middle class woman and the apolitical Asian woman constituted a double invisibility.

Similarly, Sonia Shah has written that Asian American women searching for forms of expression were continually brought short by first-wave feminist models that located Asian American feminist responses as 'American' (i.e., White) rather than Asian; instead, Shah calls for a "bicultural feminism" or a "pan-Asian feminist agenda" that would work against the Black/White paradigms driving American feminism and engage with "our own form of cultural schizophrenia, from the mixed and often contradictory signals about priorities, values, duty, and meaning our families and greater communities convey" (1994: 154).

I would argue too that part of *taiko*'s appeal lies in its redefinition of the Asian American woman's body and its dialogic relationship to 'women's work'—i.e., the nimble fingers behind the clothing and computer industries.<sup>8</sup> The contained movement of women's fingers vs. the woman's body filling space with large gestures; the closed doors of the sweatshop vs. the stage; women taking orders vs. the woman

stepping forward, in 'leisure', into furious movement. *Taiko* opens up the body: the legs are wide apart and the movement of the arms commands a large personal space. How many of us were taught to keep our knees together and to speak softly? *Taiko* provides alternative ways of moving through physical and sonic space that are passionately appealing to Asian American women for real reasons, but it does so while creating ties of cooperation and collaboration. I am reminded of the only time in a *taiko* class when I found myself intensely irritated, angry beyond reason. Rev. Tom was absent and one of the advanced students in the class, Elaine (a Sansei in her forties), was leading us on *shime*. We were having trouble staying together during a particular phrase in a piece and Antoine, a Swiss man in his twenties, suddenly said, I'll play *kane*. The *kane* is only played by the person in charge, usually Rev. Tom. We tried it again, with Elaine still on *shime* but Antoine now playing *kane*. He slouched against one of the pews, looking down at the *kane* as he played fast and loud, driving all of us. In fact, it was too fast, though he certainly played more 'authoritatively' than Elaine, so we were even more ragged. We stopped and people made various cautious comments ("That wasn't much better, was it?"); of course, no one was going to do or say anything confrontational, though I felt that Antoine's decision to seize the *kane* was inexcusably so. After waiting a moment to see if the situation would resolve itself, I said to him, Maybe it's better with just Elaine. He paused, and just when I thought he was going to argue with me, he shrugged and put down the *kane*. Thinking about it later and trying to sort out my own irritation, I recognized the racialized and gendered shape of the encounter: Asian American woman, White (European) man. He challenged her authority despite her greater experience and in fact her twenty years' seniority; he didn't maintain *kata* or eye contact with her or the rest of us when he played; he disregarded—challenged—both the social construction of authority in the class and the group dynamic that we have all grown to depend upon. And it left me completely unsettled.

The women I know who play *taiko* do not necessarily self-identify as feminists, but I do think that *taiko* is a sounded bodily channel for addressing the on-going gendered dialectic of the Asian vs. the Asian American. I don't know how *taiko* speaks to Japanese women or to gendered social practices in Japan; this in itself would make a fascinating study. In a sense, I only have half the picture of *taiko* as a transnational gendered phenomenon, but it is impossible to write about Asian American *taiko* without addressing its elisions and distinctions from the Asian body, and the specific spin that all this has for Asian American women. As the anthropologist Aihwa Ong has written, emancipation-in-diaspora is not a given, nor does feminist ethnography offer a denationalized set of critical practices unless we insist that it do so. Instead, Ong suggests that we develop a "dialectic of disowning and reowning, of critical agency shifting between transnational sites of power" which can result in "a deliberate cultivation of a mobile consciousness" (1995: 367-8). *Taiko* is not a matter of Asian American women 'rediscovering' a certain kind of Asian body but is rather an intricate process of exploring a Japanese bodily aesthetic and refashioning/re-embodying its potential for Asian American women. In this sense, I am locating an erot-

ics of *taiko* that reclaims the territory mapped out by *Rising Sun*. How ‘deliberately’ any of us do this isn’t really the question: the passionate involvement that *taiko* can instill is simply an example of how belief, understanding, and the body come together in ways that are different from abstracted, objectified thought. In this case, thought and bodily action join in ways that are in fact theorized in the Buddhist martial arts, though few of us explore that route through books. For Asian American women, *taiko* is a true performative act, one so profoundly understood through the body that it is rarely channeled into other media like words.

Which brings me back to experience and its liveness, though this time with a gendered twist. The ephemerality of performance is no less a mode of cultural production than those institutions (i.e., government, religious life, the law, the workplace) often taken more seriously as spheres of determination and influence. *Taiko* is a complex site that highlights the meeting ground of transnational movement, gender, and the insistence on being seen and heard. Lisa Lowe has encouraged a closer examination of “those institutions, spaces, borders, and processes that are the interstitial sites of the social formation in which the national intersects with the international” (1996: 172), and *taiko* is one such location that opens up an Asian American space in conversation with the Asian. Its liveness is fundamentally part of its power for Asian American women. Dorinne Kondo has tried to write about the place of liveness in her own excitement about Asian American theater and her understanding of its link to empowerment; she relates how seeing Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* on Broadway made her feel that she *had* to write about it, “as though my life depended on it” (1995: 50). Describing the liveness of theater as “another register,” she notes that turning her research toward Asian American theater represented “a kind of paradigm shift away from the purely textual toward the performative, the evanescent, the nondiscursive, the collaborative” (1995: 51). As an anthropologist, Kondo articulates something that I think many Asian American woman *taiko* players know intuitively: that those moments of choreographed sound and movement speak in many different ways at once, channeling power and pleasure through the body and redefining that body through pounding heart and shouted presence. ‘The Asian’ becomes a vexed self, a more authentic shadow self that we didn’t know we had, that we’re not sure we *want* to have, yet it serves as a vector for how we come together in this vital, comfortable, unspoken way even as it leaves us more unsure than ever about the in/authenticity of the Asian/American.

The politics of ethnicity in *taiko* are thus bottomless, yet I remain sure that I learn something about Asian America when I play. Certainly *taiko* remodulates every category it touches—the Japanese, the Japanese American, the Asian, the Asian American—and the sensual sounded body passes through these noisy historical constructions and emerges asserting yet new presences. The complications and the risks are so fundamentally part of it all that I must end by arguing they are intrinsically part of the pleasure—the pleasure of listening to *taiko*, of learning it, of performing it, of teaching it. Perhaps that is what I take away from it, most of all—that the impossibil-

ity of containing the meaning of such a clamorous practice sets up a performative too boisterous to be denied, too loud to be any one thing.

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### Notes

- 1 This essay is drawn from a longer chapter in my book in progress, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, that addresses the cultural politics of Japanese *taiko* in the U.S. and specifically in the context of Asian American cultural politics.
- 2 San Francisco Taiko Dojo also played on the soundtracks for *Apocalypse Now*, *Return of the Jedi*, and *The Right Stuff*.
- 3 This instrument is called the "cannon" by members of San Francisco Taiko Dojo because of its physical appearance. It consists of three pieces of metal pipe welded together and mounted on a stand so that it stands horizontally at waist height. It takes the place of three *kane* with different pitches (Tusler 1995: 14). Rev. Tom refers to it as a "muffler," again due to its appearance.
- 4 Dorinne Kondo's indictment of the film along these lines (1997: 240-51) is both thoughtful and sweeping.
- 5 I posted a query to the Rolling Thunder *taiko* discussion list, asking for responses to the *taiko* scene in *Rising Sun*, and I received several responses from list participants between January 14-30, 2000.
- 6 E-mail note, 30 January 2000.
- 7 E-mail note, 16 February 2000.
- 8 Lisa Lowe has written at length about the historical processes linking Asian and Asian American women's labor in the global economy, and she posits deep connections between capitalism and racialization (1996: 158):  
[T]he focus on women's work with the global economy as a material site in which several axes of domination intersect provides the means for linking Asian immigrant and Asian American women with other immigrant and racialized women. Asian immigrant and Asian American women are not simply the most recent formation within the genealogy of Asian American racialization; they, along with women working in the "third world," are the "new" workforce

with the global reorganization of capitalism. [...] They are linked to an emergent political formation, organizing across race, class, and national boundaries, that includes other racialized and immigrant groups as well as women working in, and immigrating from, the neocolonized world.

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