Another story Maria researched concerned a homeless nine-year-old who recalled waking up in her parents’ tent and watching the sidewalk move in waves. The segment ends with an interview with Kevin Waggoner, a six-year-old during the earthquake, whose father was the single park ranger assigned to the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park, the actual epicenter of the earthquake. Kevin had the chance to visit the epicenter with his father because his Campfire Kids group wanted a tour of the spot, to which his father agreed. His father had been in the park during the earthquake and declared that it felt milder than in the more urban part of the city, illustrating how nature is better prepared than the built environment to withstand such temblors.

Also of interest is episode 7, “A Tale of Two Newspapers,” which follows the ways that such disasters affect professionals charged with documenting them in real time. Episode 8, “The Memory Remains,” focuses on bringing back some UC Santa Cruz graduates whose experiences were recorded right after the quake; producers asked them to listen to portions of their original testimonies and to comment on how their earlier thoughts survived the test of time. Each episode utilizes the vast variety of music from the area, including excerpts from “El Sonido de la Vida” by Silva de Alegria and “Cinema Pathetic” by Blue Dot Sessions.

While *Stories from the Epicenter* is reminiscent of an extended National Public Radio series focused on a very personal, very seismic, and very geographically specific event, the episodes somehow manage to be universal in their coverage of the emotions that all listeners likely connect to events experienced in their own homes. The benefit of such podcasts to historians is obvious. There is great value to such oral histories being available online to researchers, sparing them the expense of traveling to distant archives. The downside to podcasts, in some cases, is an “amateur” quality—but the same can often be said of radio, television, and other media. At a time when inclusivity is more important than ever, podcasts like these offer individuals the chance to share their voices and, simultaneously, to facilitate wide sharing of experiences, ideas, and emotions. Well-executed history podcasts like these suit our times perfectly.

Rosanne Welch


Deborah Wong’s *Louder and Faster: Pain, Joy, and the Body Politic in Asian American Taiko* demonstrates that *taiko*, a Japanese style of drumming, is more than just recreation. It is a means of expressing emotion, history, ideologies, agency, and cultural ties. Listening to, watching, and participating in *taiko* offers a window into the Japanese American, Asian American, and, indeed, the general human experience.

*Taiko* has grown in popularity over the years, not only for entertainment but, more importantly in Wong’s view, as a “political project” (18). As Wong makes clear, *taiko* drummers use the form to challenge the stereotype of passive Asians and make their voices heard. Taiko addresses painful Japanese American memories, such as interment
during World War II. It preserves culture and transmits ideas. Rather than simply giving a history of taiko, Wong focuses on its multiple meanings and analyzes the parts, performances, participants, and portrayals of taiko.

In *Louder and Faster*, Wong shows that every aspect of taiko is nuanced and filled with meaning. Taiko drums demand attention from listeners through their loud, physically jarring sound. Most taiko drums are made in America following Japanese techniques, underscoring their fusion of two cultures. The *odaiko*, or big drum, denotes strength and stamina due to its immense size. Each player’s drumsticks, or *bachi*, are personal; everyone shares drums but each player must have their own pair. Each performance marks and wears on a player’s pair of bachi, which further solidifies their individuality. The simple and sturdy taiko clothing is patterned after that of Japanese laborers, thus consciously referencing Japanese immigrant history. The taiko players yell out mnemonic syllables and actively move their bodies while playing, which taiko masters believe connect drummers’ physical, mental, and spiritual identities. Taiko teachers maintain that a player’s *ki*, or energy, is invaluable for playing taiko well, and a person’s *ki* is connected to the mind, body, and soul. As a group activity, taiko reduces selfishness and fosters cooperation. Many taiko pieces are open-sourced and open to improvisation, which allows for multiple interpretations for one song. Of course, these aspects of taiko are significant in and of themselves, but they also directly affect the interests of the Asian American community, for good or ill.

Wong deftly illustrates how taiko is thoroughly linked to the expression of Asian American identity. For example, many female Asian American taiko players use the “strong, disciplined, and loud” nature of taiko to override the Euro-American stereotype that would cast them as “quiet, docile, and sexually available” (121). Wong asserts that taiko is a way for women to obtain pleasure together, on their terms, with a nontraditional form of eroticism that emphasizes their strength and agency. Wong argues that Asian American men use taiko similarly, to combat “popular American caricatures” of male Asians as the “houseboy or nerdy model minority,” or as “effeminate, weak, servile, and deeply unsexy” (151). Men dressed in *fundoshi* (loincloth) play the odaiko drum with high energy and power to express “hypermasculinity” (144). Many Japanese Americans have taken up taiko as a way to preserve and celebrate their culture. After U.S. entry into World War II, many Japanese Americans sought to prove their loyalty to America by minimizing or even erasing many of their Japanese customs. Many Japanese Americans converted to Christianity, did not teach their children the Japanese language, and adopted American-style clothing. Some Japanese Americans continued cultural activities such as *odori*, or traditional Japanese dancing, that they considered “colorful but non-threatening” (91). Taiko, however, is unabashed in its expression of Japanese culture. The children of internees used taiko to express their “rage over the incarceration,” either their own or on behalf of their imprisoned families (171). Taiko drumming is deafening, powerful, and it signifies a Japanese American movement to reclaim their lost history. But Wong shows how taiko’s vivid portrayal of Japanese culture can, unfortunately, have negative implications.

As ambassadors of Asian American heritage, taiko players must grapple with audiences viewing taiko as a mere exotic novelty, what Wong calls reducing cultural practices to “fetishized commodities” (113). All too often, businesses recruit taiko groups merely as
spectacle, to add oriental flavor to their products. When Mitsubishi used taiko in a car commercial, the female taiko players were reduced to “submissive geisha or dragon ladies” (180). Wong posits that such practices make taiko into “J-cool” or a consumable product (191). Wong herself recounted a performance at a dragon boat race where she felt her taiko group was merely a decoration, no different than a paper lamp or a plate of sushi. Wong often illustrates her reflections on the multiple meanings of taiko by incorporating her own experiences as a taiko drummer. The most compelling feature of Wong’s study may be its reliance on autoethnography, or using her personal experience with taiko to describe and explain cultural experience. Wong directs readers to her personal website (https://wonglouderandfaster.wordpress.com/examples/), where she displays pictures, videos, and sound clips of taiko music, players, memorabilia, and spaces. Wong offers these visual and audio sources not for the visitor’s passive consumption but to challenge them to “see,” not simply “look.” “This is what that moment feels like,” she explains; “this is how that moment opens up,” and “this is how these moments come together” (49). For example, Wong includes a blurry, aesthetically low-quality picture of a player in mid-jump but describes it as “a series of moments” that convey ability and energy (50).

Wong’s thick analysis of her sources has resulted in a book that effectively addresses all aspects of taiko. Some might argue that her heavy use of personal experiences undercuts the credibility of her work, but Wong makes clear that she aimed for more than a traditional scholarly history. Her exceptional skill at descriptive language and weaving together word, picture, and sound results in an engaging, entertaining, and relatable account. I played taiko as a child, attended taiko workshops and concerts, and met leaders in the taiko community through my church, Japanese friends, and family. Every memory I have of taiko flooded back to me while reading this book.

Louder and Faster is perfect for anyone who is interested in taiko, from dilettantes to lifelong experts. Cultural historians will also appreciate Wong’s nontraditional and innovative approach to her subject. Indeed, as Wong points out, this book could not have come at a better time. At this writing, as Americans protest state-sanctioned violence against peoples of color, this country could use more of the “respect, heritage, empowerment, inclusivity, and transparency” that taiko teaches (207).

Michael Yebisu