

University of Washington

Women Who Rock Oral History Project

Transcript

Deborah Wong

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Michelle Habell-Pallan (MHP): Thank you for being here, and can you please introduce yourself?

Deborah Wong (DW): Sure, my name's Deborah Wong. I am a bunch of things, haha. I'm an ethnomusicologist. Um, I teach at the University of California Riverside which is in Southern California, just east of L.A. I've been there since 1996 and I love teaching there. It's the most diverse campus in the U.C. system. I'm very—most of our students are first generation, you know, college students. It's just perfect for me. I love being there. As an ethnomusicologist I focus on especially race and ethnicity and social justice and a lot of my research over the last twenty years has focused on Asian American performance and the way it intersects with the American racial imagination. You know, how the Asian American is both a political construct and social formation. As well as always being endangered of being reabsorbed into Orientalism, basically. So I work on performance. Everything from Asian Americans making jazz and hip hop and any other kinds of music, and my current research is about Taiko which is a form of originally Japanese, Japanese American drumming, but at this point is more broadly Asian American, you could say, and even more broadly is sort of becoming a world music phenomenon. And I'm very much looking at that moment where it's in danger of becoming everything to everyone as opposed to having meanings rooted in community. So I'm writing about all of that and I'm writing about it from the position of both being an ethnomusicologist and a performer—I've been studying Taiko for over a decade so I'm quite invested in what's gonna happen.

MHP: Okay, so we're back here at the Women Who Rock Making Scenes, Building Communities Conference. So we kind of are hearing the joyous voices of people hearing the conference. So can you describe a little bit the music community, or music communities you're part of?

DW: You bet. And there are more than one, and at the moment, sitting here in the middle of the second WWR unconference I'm very much aware there are so many communities I want to be part of. And quite frankly, being part of one right here, even for this short moment, this day, this ephemeral sort of, you know, gathering place is making me long for the kinds of spaces that this unconference, this gathering represents. You know, so this is one of my communities, this is one of the places where I do what I do. [laughter] Yeah, so you know, to be honest with you I spend a lot of my time in the Ivory Tower, you know, and being at this conference makes me very aware that many of my daily environments are very much defined by heterosexist assumptions. You know, straight white male assumptions about the world. Many of my mundane, quotidian daily environments. And I say this as a woman of color—a feminist of color. That's a reality. Even though it's the ivory tower, a place where I do believe there is free speech and the opportunity to think freely as well, you know, but there are also very serious constraints around it. So this space is extraordinary in the way that it turns on its head all of those things and makes me long for those places where this would be normal—this would be the norm. And I'm just gonna say that for today it is the norm. For these moments it is normal and I'm just gonna revel in it. I seek out other spaces that are different from my daily, quotidian experiences, and one of those places is Taiko, this world of Japanese American and Asian American drumming. I seek out spaces that are defined by Asian American concerns, or a kind of space that could be called Asian America is created. I'm also very self-consciously focused on finding a feminist Asian American space within that drumming tradition. To be honest with you, it's not part of the group that I'm in, which is directed by, you know, a wonderful man but a man all the same who has inherited all of the masculinist assumptions of the tradition. Great teacher, great person, great friend of mine, but nonetheless I also long for a different kind of Taiko space. Taiko is, in the North American context, like 75% of all Taiko players are women, and most of them Asian American women. So something interesting is going on there and the question is why are so many women drawn to it and many of them are ready and willing and able to talk about it in very vivid terms. And talking about how this loud and physical form of performance—big drums and big sticks—you're sweating, you're shouting, you're jumping around, it's wonderfully loud and physical music, women talk about the way it sort of releases them. It opens them up in their own body. And you do this collectively with a lot of other people, all together in a sort of group. So women are often able to talk about what this form of drumming does for them as Asian American women in very compelling terms. Terms I want to write about. Terms I learn from. All of that, so that is one of the places that I've spent a lot of time as a musician, as a scholar, as a community worker over the last decade or so.

MHP: Can you talk a bit about when and where you were born and how that connects to your musical experience?

DW: Oh, sure, yeah. I was born on the East Coast in New York City; I grew up in New Jersey in the suburbs. I'm half Chinese-American and half white-American. My mother has got blue eyes and reddish blonde hair and she's Scots and German so I'm a whole mixture of things, and I grew up in an environment where there were not many other Asian Americans. I was always very aware that I was Chinese-American because that's my entire extended family. From an early point I knew I wanted to study people. I thought I wanted to

be an archaeologist. Once I went to college I realized it was really live people I wanted to study. And I found ethnomusicology as a discipline and I'm so happy that I did because it enabled me to put together—I've been playing flute since the time I was very young—since fourth grade when there was still music in the public school system—loving it. I mean, flute was at the center of my existence as a young person, all the way through college, and discovering ethnomusicology gave me a place to put the music and the interest in people and society and why people think and believe what they do—to put it all together. I mean, thank goodness I stumbled across certain books in the library. Yeah, so where I came from has everything to do with you know, my family life, my understanding of racism and sexism from an early age, my parents were always very open and thoughtful in talking about the difficulties they went through. A Chinese-American man and a white women getting together in the mid nineteen fifties? I mean, it wasn't done in that point in time. Both of their families were entirely freaked out. You know, so I mean I learned about racism, both external systemic structural racism and the ways we all internalize this as everyday human beings.

[break]

I was aware from a very early age about the many ways that race is part of our lives. My parents being together was an extraordinary thing. My father was a second generation Chinese American, my mother is white, Scottish and German, and when they got married in 1955 it was to the complete dismay and anger, you know actually both families were furious at the fact that they were getting together. And eventually my father's family came around. So my extended family is Chinese American and that's been part of my identification, my sense of self, my sense of connectedness is through my Chinese American family. My mother's family never came around, so I'm very much my mother's daughter as well as my father's daughter but I never knew my mother's family. And of course this has shaped who I am and how I think of myself as both Chinese American, Asian American, multi-ethnic. So thinking about race has always been a part of my daily life in terms of literally conversations around the dinner table as well as an understanding of the ways that American society has racist structures that drive what it is. My parents knew this, both as intellectuals and as people making it through the day, right? So those conversations are always part of my family life. It's not surprising then that I carried them forward into my research and my broader interests. Pulling that together with music, that's a natural thing and I've been much inspired by all the scholars who work on race and music. There's a large list of such people: George Lipsitz, Ingrid Monson, Rhondera Donnel [sic]. I mean the list goes on and on and on and on. The great people that inspire me daily. So yeah, for me a lot of things came together.

MHP: I wish I was your student; I really enjoyed your students. Like 20 years ago. Would that be 20 years ago? [...] So can you talk about, well, did the work-life of your parents affect your music in any way?

DW: Affect my music? Yeah sure, their work life's specifically? Yeah, interesting. I guess the first thing really that should always be acknowledged is that my parents supported my music making. You know, certainly at the initial levels being a kid and the middle class

thing and the, you know, “your kids should take music lessons” they did that, as do many parents. But the fact is that when I decided to go into music as like, a career and occupation being a professor and all that, they also supported that. And not all parents do. You know, like period. And definitely not all Asian American parents do. There’s actually a book about just this, by Marioysho Hata about Asian Americans and classical music and, you know, the very divided ways that Asians and Asian Americans think about this sort of thing, classical music as a means of upward mobility, on the one hand, and on the other hand something that’s not serious. Like, shouldn’t she be a doctor or lawyer, you know? Yeah, my parents didn’t have those attitudes. So my parents were a part of that 1950s generation, Post WWII. My father went to college through the GI Bill so there’s a real belief in education as a means to make it, you know, the American Dream. And somehow that all came together in the ways they supported and encouraged my interest in music. And Lane Ever told me to be a doctor or lawyer. It’s really kind of amazing [4:06]

MHP: What did your father end up doing?

DW: My dad was really amazing. Um, he was ABD in psychology, he ended up being the dean of students at Rutgers University through the seventies, a very turbulent period. Um, yeah. So I sort of watched him as a young teenager dealing with the Vietnam War period on campus. Yeah, so. Yeah, my dad was remarkable.

MHP: Mhm, and your mom?

DW: She was a housewife for many many years and when I was in middle school decided to go back to school to get a library degree and MA. She was a feminist, very very openly. And yet when it came to the point where she wanted to go back to school she had to negotiate it with my father and indeed with my brother and I. When it came to sort of, you know, ground level in the family, it’s all very well to be a feminist but who’s gonna have dinner on the table at the end of the day? You know, right? So I also saw all of that and had to go through my own process of consciousness raising, partly being pissed with my mother because she wasn’t there all the time anymore and also admiring, eventually what she was doing.

MHP: How’d they meet?

DW: How’d they meet? They both grew up on different side of town, dare I say. And they both went to, at the time, was the University of Buffalo.

MHP: So, what’s been your best experience through music?

DW: But there’s so many. We should ask everybody that here at this conference. The best experience? Well, I hate to have to choose a best experience because there have been so many for so many years, as I hope is the case for us all. But I would say that, and I’ve loved every music I’ve ever learned, and may there be many more, but when I was a graduate student beginning to explore musics beyond Western art music. In graduate school, for the first time as an ethnomusicology student I started to explore musics beyond Western art

music. Especially through studying certain forms of Asian music, initially gamelan from Java in Indonesia I learned about ways “music-ing,” and I’m going to use that as a verb, that involved putting your ego aside, that involved creating a collectivity, and I learned firsthand through that music and then others as well, different ways of being with people through music, and this was profound for me. To really be freed up in those ways and to learn how it could be to be with other people in those ways. Western art music, I love the sounds, I love the music, I love the repertoire, I love going to concerts of Western art music, but at this point in my life I really hate the social aesthetics that drive it. You know, the kind of hierarchy, the competitiveness, the neuroses that the tradition creates in people. It messes people up spending all those hours alone in practice rooms, and trying to attain this level of perfection and often doing it all alone by themselves. It’s a very strange tradition in terms of the social aesthetics. There are other musics in the world that are not strange in that way, you know that model much better ways of being members of communities. And so a number of Asian musics have done that for me, and Taiko is the big one for me.

MHP: How do you go from being a flute player, right, those are diametrically opposed instruments, the flute player and the Taiko drummer. Can you talk about that journey?

DW: [Laughs] It’s true, yeah, the flute, which is so feminine, right? And of course when I was in the fourth grade now I look back and look at how our music teachers sort of guided us to certain instruments. The boys were playing trumpets and trombones and drums.

MHP: And it’s still that way because we had a conversation class with a student who, in her twenties said she wanted to play the trumpet but they made her play the flute.

DW: Oh my God, it’s still going on. Well that’s dismaying. For heaven’s sake, and definitely I was guided toward the flute, never pushed, guided because I was a girl. And I loved playing the flute, and in fact I still play the flute, but discovering the drums and its physicality and—yes, its physicality is the main point here

MHP: How did you discover that?

DW: I saw a performance, I saw the San Jose Taiko, which is a group, perform in Philadelphia in the 1990s and I was blown away, both as a woman and as an Asian American. For me seeing all of those powerful Asian Americans on stage was transformative, absolutely transformative and I’ve spoken with many, many other Asian Americans now playing Taiko who’ve had basically the same experience in other places watching other groups. That experience of seeing Asian Americans on stage making those powerful sounds and using their bodies in disciplines powerful ways—seeing it and being powerfully moved emotionally and politically thinking I want to do that, I must do that as an Asian American, you know

MHP: So how did you do that?

DW: Found a teacher. [Laughs] In Southern California there’s a lot of different Taiko groups so when I moved from the East Coast to California in 1996 one of the first things I did was

go looking for a Taiko teacher. And that's how I found Reverend Tom Kourai who is the director of the Taiko center of Los Angeles

MHP: And you said 75% of Taiko players are women?

DW: That's what I said

MHP: What do you think about that? What are your thoughts on that?

DW: Many thoughts on that. I don't think it's a coincidence. I never think that those kinds of demographics are coincidence. I don't have to spin critical theories around it. I talk to women and ask them, you know, it's very clear that many Asian American women whether it's second or third or fourth generation are still coming from family environments where often they are encouraged to be, you know, quiet in respectful and sometimes direct and sometimes indirect way. That we learn and internalize habits of silence. We internalize silence in all kinds of ways, and through Asian American studies this is much theorized and discussed, the ways in which race and gender come together in silencing ways. In some cases women who don't take Asian American studies classes are able to articulate that in often very evocative ways.

MHP: Can you have a, for instance...

DW: Oh gosh, well sure, yeah, many of the members of the group I'm in. Um, one of my friends' names is Beverly. Beverly is a sansei, a third generation Japanese American and she's been able to, to... well, there's so many of them, and whose story should I tell? And what does it mean to tell their story in this context without them here to testify to it? But what haunts many of them is the experience of internment. Of course the Japanese American internment front 1942 to 1945, many of them, several members in my group were born in internment camps. They're now in their fifties and sixties, but they were born into that context, and certainly their parents were interned. They talk about the many ways that this created community silence, you know, around the experience. And Taiko is very much a response through the Japanese American community, especially third generation sasai player to that. Literally coming out of silence. Literally coming out of silence. And I believe very much in the ways that playing together in groups of people creates a kind of critical mass. Creates a kind of politics of the body, which is undeniable. And when it's so loud that you can actually feel it as well as hear it I think that something is happening politically as well as socially as well as musically.

MHP: I agree. I think that sounds like a lot of what's going on and happens in the Seattle Fandango project, there's a whole—what's at the core of it is the idea of “convivencia”

DW: I love that term and aesthetics.

MHP: Right, so Martha was talking about this idea of convivencia, the way she describes it co-living but co-misserating. But also with intention. With intention to, again, combat the isolation, combat the way we've been denied our kind of basic human rights, she argues to

make music. To be in relation to each other to make music for many different reasons, you know, because we've been trained to be consumers of music rather than producers of music. But then when you feel the power you're in the room, everybody's playing, and it's very women centered, the Seattle Fandango project with the dancing and the drumming and the feet, you feel that something, some kind of energy is being conjured, I will say

DW: Absolutely, yeah, what does it mean to feel that joy? That pleasure? To feel it collectively. To feel emplaced. To feel at home. All of that happens at once through the music.

MHP: Wow, I didn't ever understand that connection between the silence and the internment experience and then coming to the States, Taiko, or drum, coming to the drum, coming to the collectivity.

DW: That's it. But that level is not even a metaphor, it's literal if you see what I mean.

MHP: Well that's wonderful. I'm going to ask you one last question. If you look forward twenty years from now based on what you're doing and what your experience in your project, how do you imagine music communities in the future, and how might they be different? What are your dreams and imaginings about that?

DW: Wow, I don't think in those terms very often. For me I often live in a politics of the now. Any of us working on the community level and continually working on race politics are continually challenged by the politics of the now, and often we're forced into reactions, you know, and have to sort of sit and think what about action? What about defining the terms on our own? When it comes to music and community making and all of that, well first of all I want to see more of it. I look at the K-12 system and the way that the arts have sort of systemically and systematically been removed from it I'm very troubled by that and we see the impact and then adults who have sometimes had no contact with such things. What I envision from now is 20 years from now, how about tomorrow, is a United States where not .1 percent of the national budget is put toward the arts, but, say, how about ten? How about twenty percent of the national budget is put towards it? But especially ways to focus on community building through music. Really to shift the terms away from conservatory models towards community models is absolutely needed. And I really believe that your project, that women who rock is doing that, is modeling that—is beyond modeling that, is doing that. And the model that's in place is one we should all attend to and take elsewhere and use and operationalize.

DW: Great, thanks so much, and to be continued

MHP: Thanks, I hope so. Thank you.
