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Book review published in Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture,
University of Nebraska Press, vol. 10, 2006
E-ISSN: 1553-0612 Print ISSN: 1090-7505

Deborah Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 388p. Bibliography, index. ISBN 0-415-97039-3.

There's a particularly delicious moment in comedian Margaret Cho's stand-up routine when she waxes nostalgic for one of her best-remembered and favorite television programs from the seventies, the decade of her childhood. "Kung Fu" starred a young (and decidedly *non* Asian) David Carradine as a Shaolin monk who escapes to the American wild west after committing a desperate and violent act in his native China. Cho remembers that, even as a child, she recognized the incongruencies of casting this Caucasian actor as a Chinese character. She comments that, instead of naming the series "Kung Fu," it *should* have been called "Hey! That Guy's Not Chinese!"

Deborah Wong's important collection of essays *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* is similarly filled with moments of marvelous recognition of incongruencies while also engaging in trenchant and critical analyses of various music-making practices of Asian Americans and the realms (physical, cultural, metaphorical) they excursion in order to pursue their art. Wong's work is both "ethnographic and postmodern, ... an attempt to show how certain Asian Americans imbricate agency and rewriting through their engagement with music" (7). And, like Cho's humor, Wong's analyses are particularly meaningful and crucial for those of us who identify as Asian American, and for those whose interest in music making

and analysis have left us wanting for more substantive investigation, feeling disinherited from critical race theories which often define only in Black and White. The book's title quotes a line from Asian American rap group the Mountain Brothers: "Dumb nonsense I hate/The truth some contemplate/Ain't tryin to wait I possess the power/To speak it louder" (4).

Wong sees and hears transgression on many levels – local, global, trans-global – and here excavates soundworlds with fervor, insight and elegance while juggling bailiwicks as ethnomusicologist, cultural critic, performer, audience member. The collection of essays is organized into three sections; the first, "Southeast Asian Immigrants Sounding Off," considers the activities and impetuses of some first generation musicians from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Straddling the spaces of recent homeland and (sometimes-hostile) adoptive land, these diasporic artists sound and resound along and across the borderland of displacee and pioneer. The author traces the musical and cultural pilgrimages of musicians like Khamvong Insixiangmai, a premier Laotian-born *lam* singer, while burrowing into and out of his creative process and devices with a consciousness of conduit metaphors, verb morphology, and meta-language as well as a deft textual and musical analysis of his songs. "Khamvong's songs have no hero in the mold of

Achilles, Arthur, or Roland. There is only an 'I' who is and isn't Khamvong himself... Good and evil are so obvious as to be left unexplored" (32).

Wong skillfully explores the historical memory and remembering of Angel Island immigrants through the work of poet Genny Lim and composer Jon Jang (37-50) who use texts from poems and interviews of the detainees and mixtures of Western and Asian musical instruments to evoke haunting, multi-layered music (included on the accompanying CD). The author is equally adept at popular genres, penetrating the Vietnamese American karaoke culture in southern California with an attentive and lively dissection of the practice, paying particular attention to gendered differences. For one, men tend to socialize at karaoke bars and restaurants while women often gather in groups at one another's homes, pooling their music collections in a kind of daytime, aesthetic exchange (78). Wong also attends to the narratives embedded in karaoke videos (79-85), again with an eye (and ear) toward the cultural remembering of emigrés, the transforming as well as the anchored elements which inform the performance practice in both clear and subtle ways.

Acknowledging tropes of displacement and embracement, Wong never yields to facile metaphors or sentimental truisms. Indeed, where Wong especially shines is in her posing of seemingly incongruous points (*e.g.* linking karaoke to puppet theater through Sharon Mazer's notions of those things verging on, but never attaining, the status of living [85]) and acute pairings of disparate sonic terrains from folk, classical, and popular traditions. And like the innovative Asian American sound artists she profiles and explores,

Wong joins the vanguard in breaking ground in Asian American studies by interrogating fields previously deemed inconsequential or "special interest."

The second, and shortest, section, "Encounters," focuses on two essays: "Making Space, Making Noise: Locating Asian American Resistance in the Festival" and "Listening to Local Practices: Performance and Identity Politics in Riverside, California" which take us along the bumpy roads of festival planning, audience reception, local activism, and even national neo-colonialisms (Jay Leno's *Dancing Itos*, anyone? (117-119). Tackling challenging and ever-present debates of representations of self and community (*Should Yo-Yo Ma be regarded as a performer of Asian American music?* [125]), the author also sets her senses upon the academy, requesting a healthier marriage of the ethnography of Performance Studies with the progressive politics of Ethnic Studies. "Accountability is...two-tiered. Accountability to the community, certainly, but also a commitment to continuously question the dyadic relationship between community and academy" (142).

The third and, to me, most vibrant and immersive section is titled "New Interventions" – a group of seven essays where Wong brings previously understudied subjects of Asian American performing bodies (jazz, improvisation, hip hop, Taiko) under a microscope of critical theory. Working from theories of body and corporeality from Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Elaine Scarry and others, Wong suggests that seeing racialized bodies is "a[nother] vehicle of memorialization, though an involuntary one" (166).

Unafraid to personalize and, indeed, embody her subjects, Wong dissects her own experience (as a mixed race, Chinese/White American) in studying and performing taiko. For those of us who have performed an Asian music (not our “own”) Wong ably captures and parses the experience wholly in “Taiko in Asian America,” allowing us a powerful abreaction through her fascinating and thoughtful inquiry into the dense interracial and interpersonal politics of a taiko group. “The point here is that those words [Japanese taiko terms, undefined] from an Elsewhere are now part of a particular kind of Asian American experience” (196). It is also here where she trajectories the complexities of one of the most important post-colonial theorists, Gayatri Spivak, who censures the romantic notions of some leftist intellectuals as merely reproducing the colonialist discourses they sought to “correct,” with her chronicling of white middle class men in taiko groups. With their practice of a strict adherence to “tradition” and insistence on speaking to each other only in Japanese taiko words, and chastizing a Chinese American for not knowing Japanese, “her language” (208), Wong skewers these neo-colonial micro-fascisms and illustrates the thorny underside of world music performance politics.

With her scrupulous look at the politics and politicking of Asian Americans in music with essays on jazz, improvisation, and hip hop artists, Wong is undaunted in her cross-examination of race relations, and allows space for artists to speak to their own experiences. “If the very idea of Asian American jazz is new or strange, this demonstrates – successfully – the American hermeneutics of race as binary: either/or,

Black/White. Any other kind of jazz simply isn’t” (171). In “Ethnography, Ethnomusicology, and Post-White Theory” we hear fascinating firsthand accounts from Asian American (and mixed race) jazz musicians – Mark Izu, Anthony Brown, Jon Jang, and others (309-316), who navigate the often troubled arenas of funded presenting organizations (i.e. what it is to be included in and counted as a minority by an organization in grant applications, then being informed that the money received will not actually support them *per se.*)

Where other cultural critics may critique from a goodly distance, Wong is doughty and unafraid to jump in with the personal, the political, and to cross paths with post-structuralists, cultural anthropologists, and arts critics. “How Whites regard jazz has been of an ongoing concern to White critics” (171). It is in this section where we see the complexities of sharing the race, but not (necessarily) the ethnicity of the tradition one represents as a sentient and performing body. It is also here where Wong delves deepest into gender politics and the sounded conceptions of the female/feminized body in performance, scrutinizing the presentation and troubled audience reception of a controversial show by Miya Masaoka (146-152), the Japanese American performance artist.

Focusing on Asian American participation and in/visibility in traditionally African American popular musics, Wong recognizes the significance of both examined and unexamined borrowing between cultures.¹ With only a handful of other musicologists examining Asian American hip hop (music theorist Ellie Hisama is another important one), Wong

clearly relishes the local practices which inform her personal engagement with the genre. Her analyses of the recording industry through the work of the Mountain Brothers and the important Asian Improv label (234-253) are crucial to understanding the musicology of Asian American culture(s) and cross-cultures. And yet it is also disheartening (and telling) that the most visible and successful Asian American rappers and rap groups (Jin and Mountain Brothers) are now defunct – abandoning or abandoned by a field which offered them scant sustenance.

If Wong's impressive coverage lacks one aspect, it is an in-depth investigation of some of the *intra*-racial, inter-ethnic conflicts which plague the complex relational narratives of Asian America. These often rest on a perilous infrastructure of ethnic hierarchies (often divided into East Asian versus Southeast Asian communities), not unlike the shade-based racism in African American

communities, deftly discussed by African American cultural critics like Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. An agile examination by Wong of these (often undiagnosed and unexplored) intra-Asian clashes would be much welcomed by many inside and outside these communities.

In exploring the music cultures of what has been called a “model minority” and at times, an invisible presence, Wong is interested in two metaphors: seeing and hearing race in an Asian American performing body. In *Speak It Louder* she connects and reconnects, for music communities and especially for Asian American music communities, the voice to the body to identity politics in a meaningful and vital way. It is a remarkable and important achievement, and is no doubt poised to be a significant influence in the worlds of musicology and ethnic studies.

Notes

1. Several collections of Asian American and African American cultural and political relations and connectives also explore the currents and undercurrents of shared racialized spaces. For two examples, see Vijay Prashad's *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 2001) and Bill V. Mullen's *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004).