



Media Contact:

Zoe Huey

[zhuey@firstvoice.org](mailto:zhuey@firstvoice.org)

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Story Circle of the Japanese Diaspora unites people of Japanese descent through a healing ritual of personal story.**

**SATURDAY 20 MAY  
10:00 – NOON Pacific Daylight Time  
On ZOOM**

San Francisco, CA - First Voice presents the third annual Story Circle of the Japanese Diaspora: *WE never die*, an on-line celebration of life created and conceived by America's first nationally recognized Asian American storyteller, Brenda Wong Aoki and Asian American jazz pioneer Composer Mark Izu.

*WE never die* is a healing ritual to celebrate the eternal spirit within. Even after our physical bodies are gone, our spirits live on - in the memories of people whose lives we touch, in the art we create, and in the stories we share.

During the first hour of Story Circle, our presenting artists will share personal offerings they have created specifically for this occasion. Participants will then have the opportunity to engage in

facilitated small group discussions with one another where they are invited to share their own stories and any burning issues that may be on their minds and in their hearts.

The Story Circle of the Japanese Diaspora gathers together the lost tribe of people of Japanese descent who were forced to scatter during the incarceration. We embrace our mixed-race children and the Shin-Issei community in order to heal, comfort, and strengthen together through the power of personal story. In sharing our stories we understand how our collective history impacts our present-day lives and lights the way for our future, and future generations to come. The Story Circle is a heart centered event. All presenters and facilitators are artists, healers, or spiritual leaders.

Testimonials from previous Story Circle events include:

*"I think this space is especially important for Japanese Americans because of the custom of enryo. We tend to not share our stories and thus our ancestors die a second death because they are not remembered. This space gives us a safe community to share our stories so that we can celebrate our heritage and be authentically seen." - 2022 participant*

*"Assimilation is annihilation. When I came to the US I chose to go by my English name because I felt fear that I would be rejected. I wish I had not gotten rid of the part of me that signified I was Japanese. It still hurts. Rob's story of being yonsei and not knowing if they were Japanese enough also spoke to me." - 2022 participant*

*"... I felt like, in terms of my culture, there was that feeling of a part of me that I did not need to explain. I was seeing many different magnificent iterations of my culture in different lifetimes, learning a plethora of cultural richness by the second. By dance, by museum, by film, by poetry, by song, by longer projects, by stories, you do not realize how needed it is to hear these cultural stories in every different form of communication of art until you do; it is world-defying and life-changing." - 2021 participant*

Video Links:

[We're Still Here](#), by tashi tamate weiss

[Story Circle Digital Collage](#) by Andi Wong

[First Voice Story Circle Website Page Upcoming Events](#) (including link to [Eventbrite](#))

Presenters and artists include

**Andi Wong** (digital and teaching artist and arts advocate, based in SF)

**Chizu Omori** (a Nisei activist, journalist, filmmaker and internment camp survivor)

**Eryn Kimura**, (a Hapa Gosei filmmaker & multimedia artist based in SF and host of the event)

**Derek Nakamoto** (veteran producer and composer with an illustrious 30 year career of producing, composing & arranging for artists such as Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston & Janet Jackson, based in LA)

**devorah major** (SF's third Poet Laureate, based in SF)

**Hafez Modirzadeh** (pioneering composer, saxophonist, and music theorist whose musical approach blends American Jazz with Iranian dastgah heritages, based in NY )

**Kenny Endo** (American musician and Taiko Master, based in Hawaii)

**Mas Koga** (Shin-Issei musician/composer, based in New York)

**Nancy Ukai** (A Topaz descendent, writer, researcher, and Project Director of 50 Objects)

**Sara Sithi-Amnuai** (professional musician, composer, and creative technologist, based in LA)

**Satsuki Ina** (professor emeritus at CA State University Sacramento, psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of trauma, and founder of Tsuru for Solidarity)

**Shoko Hikage** (a natori koto master sent from Japan to found the Sawaii School of Koto in America)

**Traci Kato-Kiriyama** (award-winning multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary artist and author of *Navigating With(out) Instruments*, based in LA)

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Bios

**Brenda Wong Aoki** is a playwright, co-artistic director of First Voice, and according to the archives of the National Storytelling Festival, America's first nationally recognized Asian Pacific Storyteller. She creates works for theater, symphony, contemporary dance, world music, taiko, jazz and live performance with film. A descendant of Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, and Scottish ancestors, her work speaks to the essential hybridity of American culture. Brenda has deep roots in San Francisco. Her grandfather, Reverend Chojiro Aoki, was a founder of the nation's first Japantown (San Francisco) in the 1800's and her grandmother, Alice Wong, a bi-racial Chinese woman, was a founder of the first Chinatown Garment Union.

Aoki, a dance major at UC Santa Cruz, was told she was too short and ethnic looking to ever be on stage, which only strengthened her determination. She went on to be a founding company member of the Asian American Dance Collective and the Asian American Theater Company, two of only four Asian performing arts organizations in the 1970s U.S. Her plays have been presented in such venues as the Kennedy Center, New Victory Theater on Broadway, San Diego Rep, Dallas Theater Center, Hong Kong Performing Arts Center, the Adelaide International Festival in Australia, the Esplanade in Singapore, the Graz Festival Austria and the Apollo. Her awards include multiple Hollywood-Dramalogue, Critics Circle, INDIE Awards for Best Spoken Word Recordings, a Wattis artist residency, two National Endowment for the Arts Theater Fellowships and a Japan/US Friendship Artist Fellowship. She is a founding faculty member of the Stanford Institute for Diversity in the Arts, served as a Governor for the Grammys, and as a board member for California Humanities. In 2023, commissioned by the Hewlett 50, Brenda will

premiere a new work about her family's 123-year history in San Francisco. Her proudest achievement is Mark and Brenda's son, Kai Kāne Aoki Izu.

EMMY winning composer **Mark Izu**, a third generation Japanese-American, has fused the traditional music of Asia with African-American improvisation. Izu plays acoustic bass as well as several traditional Asian instruments such as the Sheng (Chinese multi-reed instrument) and Sho (Japanese multi-reed instrument). Izu has gained international recognition for developing a new musical genre, Asian American Jazz and for directing the Asian American Jazz Festival for 20 years. He has performed with artists such as James Newton, Steve Lacy, Zakir Hussain, Kent Nagano, George Lewis, Cecil Taylor, Anthony Brown, and Jon Jang.

Izu has composed scores for film, live music concerts and theater. In 2009 Izu won an EMMY for Outstanding Music for his score in *Bolinao 52*. His film scores include Steven Okazaki's Academy Award-winning *Days of Waiting*; Emmy-winning documentary, *Return to the Valley*; and a new score for the DVD release of Sessue Hayakawa's 1909 masterpiece, *The Dragon Painter* (Milestones DVD - 2007). His theater scores have been performed at the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, and Sundance Festival and he was awarded a Dramalogue Award for Best Original Music & two INDIE Awards for best CD. His recordings include *The Queen's Garden* (INDIE Award 1999), *Tales of the Pacific Rim* (INDIE Award 1990), *Circle of Fire* (Top 10 picks of the year, SF Bay Guardian), and recordings with the Grammy nominated Asian American Orchestra. Izu's CD *Threading Time* featuring masters Togi Suenobu (Gagaku) and Zakir Hussain (tabla) was released in Tokyo in 2007. Izu's other awards include Meet the Composer, Asian Business League Artist Award, Rockefeller MAP, National Endowment for the Arts, and San Francisco Arts Commission, Izu was a founding faculty member of Stanford's Institute of Diversity for the Arts in 2002. In 2007 Aoki & Izu received the US/Japan Creative Arts Fellowship to Japan sponsored by the NEA and the Bunkacho.

#### **CALENDAR INFO:**

WHO: First Voice (Brenda Wong Aoki and Mark Izu) in collaboration with Andi Wong, Chizu Omori, Eryn Kimura, Derek Nakamoto, devorah major, Hafez Modirzadeh, Kenny Endo, Mas Koga, Nancy Ukai, Sara Sithi-Amnuai, Satsuki Ina, Shoko Hikage, and Traci Kato-Kiriyama

WHAT: Story Circle of the Japanese Diaspora: *WE never die*

WHEN: May 20 2023, 10-12pm PST

WHERE: On Zoom

HOW: Registration Link via [Eventbrite](#)