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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1j467160>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 27(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2016

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ARTICLES

Finding Buddha in the *Barrio*: Reflections on the Unanticipated Consequences of Archival Research¹

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Traditional archival research is often tremendously isolating. As we lock ourselves away in a world of our own, amidst the cartons and folders, research becomes a chore that is divorced from the meaning and fulfillment of life. Although I certainly put in many hours in wood-paneled special collections departments or chilly university libraries, as a social historian my archives also exist in community centers or the memories individuals share with me over their kitchen table. These living archives contributed not only to my dissertation about race, space, and social movements in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley, but also a new community and spiritual refuge. Through researching and writing about the Valley's Japanese American community, I learned that if we are fully open to the possibilities, the research process could unexpectedly shape both the products of our intellectual labor as well as our everyday lives.

My dissertation, "'And Make the San Fernando Valley My Home:' Contested Spaces, Identities, and Activism on the Edge of Los Angeles," challenged popular conceptions of this region based on post-World War II White suburbanism. It triangulated the multifaceted strategies that people of color, including African Americans, Latinas/os, and Asian Americans, used to upend the racism embedded in region's exclusionary laws and spatial development from the late nineteenth century to the dawn of the twenty-first. Segregated from rest of the

Valley through restrictive covenants, racist lending practices, or outright violence, those communities of color crafted a vibrant multiethnic space in and around the town of Pacoima. That neighborhood has been the home to a small, but fiercely close-knit Japanese American, or *Nikkei*, community.² Originally concentrated in agricultural work, Japanese Americans experienced the tragedies of mass incarceration during World War II. Upon their return in the late 1940s and 1950s, they built community centers, language schools, memorial gardens and other spaces both to honor their pre-World War II forbearers but also to ensure their histories and cultural activities would survive for subsequent generations.³ Although Pacoima is now an overwhelmingly Latina/o enclave, and Japanese Americans experienced residential mobility since the 1970s, the neighborhood's *Nikkei* imprint has endured.

To access this rich past and its present legacy, I turned to the San Fernando Valley Japanese American Community Center.⁴ Tucked away in a small closet in the center's gym lay a trove of sources, to which a friend, a retired school teacher and veteran civil rights activist named Nancy Gohata, gave me unfettered access. Because of her generosity, I was able to examine scores of binders that bulged with newsletters, bulletins, programs, and other ephemera. Supplemented by several oral histories, these archives portrayed a diverse community, fractured by class or generation, but nevertheless one that displayed remarkable resilience in the face of racism and exclusion. As I scoured crisp old meeting minutes, mimeographed flyers, or photo albums with plastic page covers that shifted and cracked when touched, I learned about the impressive array of ethnic organizations that existed within this small neighborhood: from gardener's associations to little league teams to *bonsai* clubs to civil rights groups.⁵ However, one institution stuck out to me: the San Fernando Valley Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, a branch of the *Jōdo Shinshū* (True Pure Land)-oriented Buddhist Churches of America (figure 1).⁶

Although I knew a few members of the temple before I began my dissertation, once immersed in research, I found it so intriguing that the Valley – the sprawling land of backyard barbeques and defense plants, of horse trails and housing covenants – had a Buddhist institution. Working-class Japanese immigrants who sought refuge from the exigencies of a hostile society that denied them property rights, access to citizenship, or even the freedom to marry someone beyond their race, founded the *sangha* (or congregation) in 1921. They met in homes and language schools up until World War II when the government forcibly banished them to desolate concentration camps and Buddhists became particular targets of suspicion. When Japanese Americans returned to the Valley, temple members continued to gather to listen to the teachings of Sākyamuni Buddha and the great *Jōdo Shinshū* teachers Shinran and Rennyo. By 1961 the *sangha* raised enough funds to construct a modest temple adjacent to the community center. As both a religious and social institution, the temple continued to grow, even though *Nikkei* economic and residential opportunities were no longer tied to Pacoima by the 1970s due to newer possibilities for integration. These transformations revealed



Figure 1: The *hondo* (or main hall) of the San Fernando Valley Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, built in 1992. Photograph by author, March 2015.

a “paradox of dispersal,” or the phenomenon of how racialized spaces that were once the centers of livelihood and survival transition into cultural hubs. This, as I explored in the dissertation, was a central feature of the Japanese American community’s history in the Valley and beyond.⁷

As the temple’s history helped me better understand larger issues about ethnic spaces across generations, my archives began to point me more and more towards the content of what the *sangha* learned on Sunday mornings. Mrs. Gohata, a longtime temple member, provided me with the temple’s 90th anniversary commemorative book, which not only explicated its storied past, but also foundational Buddhist teachings about the nature of suffering, liberation, and gratitude.⁸ Needless to say, as a seventh-year doctoral candidate on the job market, there was a whole lot of suffering in my little dissertation carrel and the life I lived beyond it.

In one conversation with Mrs. Gohata about my curiosities about Buddhism and dissertation-related woes, she suggested I attend an informal *dharma* (or Buddhist philosophy) discussion group led by the resident minister, the Reverend Patricia Kanaya Usuki. I did and soon became a regular attendee. Rev. Patti, as we affectionately address her, and the other group members exposed me to a set of teachings remarkably relevant to my life as a historian searching for meaning in primary texts and life in general.

For example, *annica*, or impermanence, is one of Buddhism's Four Marks of Existence.⁹ The truth that all aspects of life are dynamic reinforces the basic method of historical analysis: to discern change over time. This is a task that often becomes obscured when drowning in seemingly endless documents and details. The teaching of *pratītyasamutpāda*, or interdependence, lends itself to dialectical accounts of how disparate constituents articulated their relationships to each other and the worlds around them. Thus, I could approach a history of entrenched inequality in the San Fernando Valley – manifested in conflicts between immigrant farm workers and powerful growers in the Great Depression, or between anxious White suburbanites and insurgent Black student rebels in the sizzling 1960s – with greater nuance. Approaching this history of asymmetrical relationships of power through the concepts of interdependence or oneness is not to dismiss the very real outcomes of oppression and exclusion, but rather to identify the contingency and intersections in which complex meanings about race or space emerge.

On a personal note, another of the Four Marks, *dukkha*, or suffering, certainly resonated with me as a harried job market candidate. *Dukkha* arises from mental attachments tinted by our inevitable greed, anger, and delusions of what we think life should be like.¹⁰ It also informs the persistent specter of imposter syndrome that plagues countless graduate students. Yet, as I learned from the *dharma*, despite all of our imperfections we receive boundless forms of compassion in every moment of our lives.¹¹ To be sure, I continued to meet rejection letters with disappointment. But, reflecting upon the kindness of friends, loved ones, and countless others during the long dissertation process aroused a powerful sense of gratitude. This helped temper my anxieties in ways that sessions at the UCLA Graduate Resource Center or visits to theprofessorisin.com could not.¹²

In the end, I finished the dissertation, became a postdoctoral scholar, joined the ranks of the adjunct faculty underclass, but continue to study the *dharma* with Rev. Patti. Now a member of the multiethnic *sangha*, that was once a mere historical curiosity to me, I attend Sunday services, gratefully receive the generosity of other temple folks, and try to apply the *dharma* to my life. Academia is still filled with stress, frustration, and disappointment, but I attempt to entrust that my life is woven into and supported by the infinite compassion and wisdom of all life.¹³ Ostensibly, this guarantees very little, and indeed in academia we are entitled to very little. But this attitude does help me experience joy in fleeting snapshots, find gratitude even in life's unsavory moments, and stand in amazement of the

immeasurable causes and conditions that shaped me and, of course, all of the historical actors who created a more just and equitable San Fernando Valley.

Studying the unanticipated consequences of actions is a basic task for all historians. Yet, when I first set foot in that dusty storage closet in 2008, hoping only to peruse some documents, little did I know that I would walk away from my dissertation with a fulfilling new community and outlook on life.

NOTES

¹ I follow the usage of the word *barrio* (or neighborhood) by various Pacoima-based Latina/o residents, cultural workers, and activists who see the *barrio* positively. Author and local chronicler Mary Helen Ponce writes, “We lived in two worlds: the secure *barrio* that comforted and accepted us, and the Other, the institutions such as school that were out to sanitize, Americanize . . .” See *Hoyt Street: An Autobiography* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993/2006), 121. I express my gratitude to Dahlia G. Setiyawan and Valerie J. Matsumoto for comments on the first version of this essay, and to Rev. Patricia Usuki, Nancy Gohata, and the *sangha* the San Fernando Valley Hongwanji Buddhist Temple for welcoming me with incredible kindness. Thanks also go to Anna Accettola, the anonymous reviewer, and the production team for the *UCLA Historical Journal* for their comments and guidance.

² *Nikkei* generally refers to people of Japanese heritage living in the global diaspora. After Brazil, the United States has the largest overseas *Nikkei* population, see Akemi Kikumura-Yano, ed., *Encyclopedia of Japanese Descendants in the Americas* (New York: Altamira Press, 2004) for an overview.

³ On the unconstitutional forced removal and mass incarceration of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans during World War II see, Brian Masaru Hayashi, *Democratizing the Enemy: The Japanese American Internment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004/2008).

⁴ A handful of farmers, gardeners, and nursery workers founded the San Fernando Valley Japanese American Community Center in 1959, see “Japanese American Club Will Dedicate Center,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1959, SF 5.

⁵ Valerie Matsumoto provides an excellent account of how second generation Japanese American women navigated multiple terrains of race, gender, and generation through their clubs in *City Girls: The Nisei Social World in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶ The original name of the temple was the San Fernando Valley Buddhist Church. In the face of anti-Japanese racism that culminated in exclusionary immigration policies and later the mass incarceration of people of Japanese descent, the leaders of the Buddhist Mission of North America (which later became the Buddhist Churches of America) emphasized the use of Christian nomenclature in an attempt to obviate further prejudice. For an overview of the early formation of Buddhism in the West, see Michihiro Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land: The Modernization, Acculturation, and Globalization of Shin Buddhism, 1898-1941* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011). When the San Fernando Valley Buddhist Church became independent of the Los Angeles Homba Hongwanji Buddhist Temple in Little Tokyo in 1981, it became the San Fernando Valley Hongwanji Buddhist Temple.

⁷ Dean S. Toji and Karen Umemoto, “The Paradox of Dispersal: Ethnic Continuity and Community Development Among Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo,” *AAPI Nexus* 1:1 (2003): 21-46.

⁸ Jack Takeshita, et al., eds, *90th Anniversary: San Fernando Valley Hongwanji Buddhist Temple* (Pacoima: San Fernando Valley Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, 2011).

⁹ The Four Marks of Existence include suffering, impermanence, interdependence, and enlightenment, see Kenneth Tanaka, *Ocean: An Introduction to Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: Wisdom Publications, 1997), 10.

¹⁰ *Dukkha*, and the concept that it arises from attachments, also form the first and second of the Four Noble Truths, respectively. The third states that letting go of such attachments frees us from *dukkha*. The fourth truth lays out the method to end *dukkha*, the Eightfold Path.

¹¹ In *Jōdo Shinshū*, this larger concept of receiving boundless compassion speaks to the story of Amida Buddha who, as the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, vowed to liberate all sentient beings from *shigan*, a realm clouded by our ego-self and dominated by greed, anger, and ignorance, see Tanaka, “Amida Buddha: A Buddhist ‘God’?” in *Ocean*.

¹² Dr. Karen Kelsky’s “The Professor Is In” blog is a popular academic coaching site for graduate students and junior faculty.

¹³ This entrusting heart begins to describe the state of mind known as “*shinjin*.”

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