

## Images of the Liminal: Exploring Authenticity on Exhibit

As a youngster with an avid interest in art, I spent much of my pre-teen and teenage years in museums. I took classes regularly at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and took advantage of the free museum entrance the Art Institute offered to students at its school. There were sections of the museum I quickly passed through without much thought, but I would inevitably find a painting that stopped me in my tracks. Sitting down in front of it for a while, I would essentially enter a meditative state while looking at it.

I am reminded of these experiences by Carol Duncan's description of "the museum as a ritual structure."<sup>1</sup> "Like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in this case, for contemplation and learning," Duncan writes.<sup>2</sup> Museums offer "space in which individuals can step back from the practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their world – or some aspect of it – with different thoughts and feelings."<sup>3</sup> Duncan uses the term "liminality" to name this alternative state of being,<sup>4</sup> a term also embraced by many scholars of Asian American studies as characterizing the un-definable, ambiguous, cultural existence of Asian Americans. Joanne Doi likewise uses the concept of liminality to describe the process of pilgrimage,<sup>5</sup> which she describes as a "betwixt-and-between state."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Joanne Doi, "Bridge to Compassion: Theological Pilgrimage to Tule Lake and Manzanara" (doctoral dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 2007), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Doi, "Tule Lake Pilgrimage: Dissonant Memories, Sacred Journey," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, ed. Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003), 283.

These related yet distinct notions of liminality—as a temporary, contemplative retreat from the demands of daily life; as a constant negotiation of ambiguous cultural identity; and as a state of journey, experienced both physically and spiritually—are all evoked in the exhibits I chose as subjects of study. In visiting the Asian Art Museum’s exhibit, “Photographic Memories,” and the National Japanese American Historical Society’s (NJAHS) “The Many Faces of Manga” exhibit, I was given the opportunity to ponder vastly different perceptions and expressions of cultural liminality, as well as of travel—across time, space, and difference. The ways the exhibits present and contextualize their content and the particular understandings of history, culture, and Asian identity they convey are significant for Asian Americans. While the Asian Art Museum is a large, highly visible art museum and the NJAHS is a small, relatively inconspicuous, educational organization, both serve, as Duncan puts it, as “sites that publicly represent beliefs about the order of the world, its past and present, and the individual’s place within it.”<sup>7</sup> The role of exhibition spaces such as these, whether explicitly embraced by its curators or not, is consequential on a concrete level. As Duncan asserts, “To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community.”<sup>8</sup>

The Asian Art Museum is housed in a large, somewhat imposing building in San Francisco’s Civic Center area, near other major institutions such as City Hall, Davies Symphony Hall, the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library, and the War Memorial Opera House. The museum occupies the former site of the main library branch, the original

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<sup>7</sup> Duncan, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

beaux arts structure having been renovated, now featuring a largely modern interior.<sup>9</sup> Like its neighbors', the museum's physical appearance conveys institutional authority, with rows of stone columns and wide stone steps. After stepping inside, however, visitors immediately enter a strikingly different landscape—a soaring lobby area that opens to a glass roof of natural light; clean, contemporary lines and surfaces; and entries into smaller, more intimate exhibition spaces. It is not difficult to read the transitions between Western and Eastern architectural styles as symbolic of the museum's larger vision. The museum's director, Jay Xu, describes the museum as “your ticket to Asia,” inviting visitors to “travel through 6,000 years of history, trek across seven major regions, and sample the cultures of numerous countries.”<sup>10</sup> The museum is offered, implicitly and explicitly, as a gateway to international tourism. This is in accordance with Duncan's belief that “art museums are complex entities in which both art and architecture are parts of a larger whole.”<sup>11</sup>

“Photographic Memories” is displayed in a small, corner gallery, between the Korea and Japan collections, that features changing exhibits. There is no signage announcing the purpose of the gallery, however, and visitors are noticeably confused when they turn the corner “from Japan to Korea” (or vice versa) and find themselves in a thematic exhibit with pieces from other parts of Asia. One could say they become temporarily lost during their journey across Asia. The exhibit primarily features photographs from India, along with collections from China and Japan, and individual photos from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Nepal; most date from the latter 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of the photos have

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<sup>9</sup> Asian Art Museum, “Building,” Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, <http://www.asianart.org/building.htm> (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Jay Xu, “A Welcome from the Museum's Director, Jay Xu,” Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, <http://www.asianart.org/directors-welcome.htm> (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Duncan, 1.

their origins in tourism; they were bought as guidebooks or souvenirs by travelers, who at that time did not commonly own personal cameras. Professional photography studios offered photos of tourist attractions, such as famous buildings and landscapes, as well as images of local people and cultural practices, which visitors could purchase. Often, images taken in different time periods were assembled together into albums.<sup>12</sup>

The resultant albums represented, thus, not a particular journey or survey of a region at a specific point in time, but a more generic gloss of a place's exoticism. This is indicated by the curator's statement that the photos "reflect...trips [people] took [in Asia]—*or dreamed of taking*" (italics mine),<sup>13</sup> as well as the anonymity of the individual photographers who contributed most of the photos. The curator's own touristic orientation is conveyed in his introductory text, displayed within the gallery. He describes how photography studios were "set up in the *important* cities of Asia" (italics mine),<sup>14</sup> which evokes for me how tourists consider different cities either worthy of exploration or not. In mentioning that the owners of many of the photos on display are unknown, he suggests "we can only conjure images of the original owners—adventurous Westerners who made arduous trips to Asia during the nineteenth century."<sup>15</sup> This statement in particular sets the tone for the exhibit—that the photos on display are intended for, and interpreted through, a Western lens dating to a period of active colonial expansion.

This Western, exoticizing gaze is doubly indicated with each photo on display; it appears in the form of the photos themselves, which catered to touristic tastes, as well as in

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<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Del Bontá, "Photographic Memories," exhibition introductory text, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, visited April 25, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

the curatorial text accompanying the photos. A photo entitled “Women and children,” for example, shows a somber-looking group of Indian women and children arranged in three rows—one seated on the ground, another seated in chairs, and a third standing in back.<sup>16</sup>

The photographer is described as “possibly French,” and the text next to this photo reads:

Early photographers in India often grouped people from particular social, ethnic, and work backgrounds: They photographed rulers and the ruled, and discovered pockets of distinct communities on which to train their cameras. This was true of the earliest photography in Japan as well, but where Japan modernized quickly—so people wearing quaint costumes had to be posed with props in studio photographs to simulate activities of earlier times—India still offered opportunities for authentic documentation.

These laborers were photographed in a formal grouping at an outdoor location.... evidence of the great interest of photographers of that era in identifying and cataloguing groups of people native to the land. Though we might expect the people here to be smiling broadly for the camera as is typical of today’s group photos, they show a severity of expression common in early studies.<sup>17</sup>

In this text, we see the curator’s contrasting of modern and “authentic,” as well as the puzzling suggestion that a group of laborers in colonial India, forced to pose for a European photographer, would smile at the camera. We are also reminded of the pervasive Western belief in the division and hierarchy of different racial groups, which undergirded Western expansionism, colonizing projects, and slavery.

The women and children in the photo convey the liminality of poor Indians in a conquered India. Utilized as manual labor, they are arranged into static rows and displayed as a group for Western consumption, their marginal status in society ignored but their “authenticity” upheld. The criteria by which they are measured by their photographer stand in stark contrast to the realities of poverty and hard labor.

The desire of Western photographers to capture images, staged though they may be, of “authenticity” highlights the confluence of tourism, conquest, and the development of photography as a medium. A photo album on display entitled, *His Imperial Majesty’s Shoot*

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<sup>16</sup> Attributed to E. Taurines, “Women and Children,” ca. 1890, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

<sup>17</sup> Del Bontá, “Women and Children,” exhibition text, “Photographic Memories” exhibit.

in *Nepalese Terai: December, 1911*, documents the hunting expedition the prime minister of Nepal hosted for George V after his “coronation as king emperor of India.”<sup>18</sup> The histories of photographic technology and hunting are, in fact, inseparable, as described by Donna Haraway in *Primate Visions*. Carl Akeley, the American taxidermist behind the African Hall of the American Museum of Natural History in New York,<sup>19</sup> wanted to photograph the expeditions he led in Africa to collect animals for the museum.<sup>20</sup> His dissatisfaction with the existing camera technology led him to invent his own—the Akeley camera.<sup>21</sup> (Notably, it was “used extensively by the Army Signal Corps during World War I.”<sup>22</sup>) To capture images of the wildness of gorillas, animals he knew to possess “essential peacefulness,”<sup>23</sup> Akeley intentionally provoked gorillas into charging at him, photographed them, and then shot them before they were able to attack.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, he considered himself a preservationist, working to preserve the memory of an Africa he saw as quickly vanishing.<sup>25</sup>

Haraway sums up this irony in writing that “once domination is complete, conservation is urgent.”<sup>26</sup> Haraway also quotes Susan Sontag, who expresses a related understanding when she writes, “When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures.”<sup>27</sup> The preoccupation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Westerners with capturing images of “authentic native culture” was directly related to the annihilating violence of colonialism.

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<sup>18</sup> Del Bontá, exhibition text, “Photographic Memories” exhibit.

<sup>19</sup> Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 43

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 15, quoted in Haraway, 42.

This was reflected in the tourist albums of the time. While photos of local people were popular among Western tourists, so were images of sites of conquest, such as the Kashmir Gate, shown in the exhibit. The curatorial text accompanying the photo explains, "After Indians rebelling against British rule had taken Delhi, this gate was the site of a famous assault that led to the recapture of the city by the British....most British tourists felt it was a must to add such photographs to albums commemorating trips to India."<sup>28</sup> In the wake of the British empire's violent conquest of India, British civilians sought reassurances of both their dominance and of the undisturbed continuation of traditional cultures, as if the lived realities of Indians could possibly have remained unchanged by colonization.

Transformation was not an expected outcome of journey or contact; hierarchies and distinctions were expected to remain intact.

In contrast with "Photographic Memories," the NJAHS's exhibit, "The Many Faces of Manga," emphasizes the transformative effects of cross-cultural contact, as well as the need to give voice to lives lived on the margins or in "between" spaces. Whereas the Asian Art Museum is located in the city's center—both geographically and institutionally--the NJAHS occupies a small, inconspicuous, storefront space in Japantown. The NJAHS describes its mission as the "collection, preservation, authentic interpretation, and sharing of historical information of the Japanese American experience for the diverse broader national community."<sup>29</sup> Reflected in this mission statement is concern with documenting and telling the stories of Japanese Americans from their own perspectives; this is the understanding of "authenticity" conveyed in the manga exhibit. We are not invited to "sample" cultures, nor

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<sup>28</sup> Del Bontá, "Kashmere Gate, Showing the Breach of 1857," exhibition text, "Photographic Memories" exhibit.

<sup>29</sup> NJAHS, "About Us," National Japanese American Historical Society, [http://www.njahs.org/aboutus.php#mission\\_statement](http://www.njahs.org/aboutus.php#mission_statement) (accessed March 20, 2009).

to imagine for ourselves what the stories might be behind the images on display. Instead, we are offered the words of those who produced the work on display, either in the text panels next to their work or in past interviews published by the *Nichi Bei Times*, which are reproduced in large-scale, color format for the exhibit. Much of the exhibition space is occupied by these newspaper articles and text panels, along with original artwork contributed by the artists.

The definition of manga as a genre is very much in flux, as demonstrated by the wide range of styles and content included in the exhibit. Literally, the Japanese word *manga* simply means “comics.”<sup>30</sup> As a genre, however it is understood to have developed in Japan following World War II.<sup>31</sup> Ken Kaji of the NJAHS Board of Directors describes the phenomenon:

Millions of post-war commuters, students and salary workers, for whom the manga became a convenient form of distraction, made manga a national craze. This readily available form of literature conveyed imaginative and heroic stories that reflected emerging modern sensibilities and moralities.<sup>32</sup>

Osamu Tezuka, the creator of *Astro Boy*, who began his comics career in the wake of the war, is widely regarded as the “father of manga.” His work is seen as having played a significant role in popularizing the genre. Interestingly, while manga is viewed as a Japanese creation, Tezuka was largely influenced by Walt Disney animated films<sup>33</sup>, as well as American comic books.<sup>34</sup> In turn, many of the Asian American manga artists in the exhibit cite manga from Japan, as well as Japanese films, as early influences in their work. Stan Sakai, for example, describes how, as a sansei growing up in Hawaii, he frequently

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<sup>30</sup> Deb Aoki, “The Many Faces of Manga,” exhibition introductory text, NJAHS, visited April 22, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Kaji, editorial note, *Nikkei Heritage* ix (spring 2002): 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Aoki.

<sup>34</sup> Ben Hamamoto, “Tezuka, the Ambassador of Manga,” *Nichi Bei Times*, July 12, 2007, as reprinted in “The Many Faces of Manga” exhibit.

watched *chambara* (samurai action films) in a local theater.<sup>35</sup> The comic book series he has authored for twenty-five years, *Usagi Yojimbo*, features a samurai rabbit living in Edo-era Japan and includes aspects of Japanese folklore and tradition. Sakai's comics have, in turn, become popular both among white, American comic artists and manga fans in Japan.<sup>36</sup> This kind of open and fluid movement of influence and inspiration stands in contrast to the more fixed understandings of culture and difference conveyed in "Photographic Memories." These manga artists not only cross borders with their work; their work originates in multiple contexts and reflects these mixed origins and influences simultaneously.

The flow of exchange is not limited to contacts between mainstream American and Japanese cultures. Deb Aoki, one of the exhibition's curators and author of the "Slice O' Life" comic strip, read Japanese manga growing up but names the alternative-culture comic book series, "Love and Rockets," written by Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez, as most influential on her work. "Their stories about life in LA and Mexico from a Hispanic-American point of view (with a punk rock twist) helped me see that it was legitimate to draw about my life, where I'm from, and not feel forced to tell stories that I don't feel personally passionate about."<sup>37</sup> Aoki is not alone finding, in comics, a way to tell her own stories, from the perspective of someone on the periphery of mainstream, American culture. Fellow Asian American artist Lela Lee, whose "Angry Little Girls" comic strip combines the cuteness of Sanrio with the foul-mouthed sarcasm of a Margaret Cho stand-up routine, relates how she has found a voice in comics. The text panel next to her work reads:

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<sup>35</sup> Hamamoto, "Usagi Yojimbo: Bugs Bunny Has Nothing on This Cult Favorite," *Nichi Bei Times*, July 10, 2008, as reprinted in "The Many Faces of Manga" exhibit.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Keith Kamisugi and Kyle Tatsumoto, "Hawai'i-born Cartoonist Deb Aoki Shares 'Slices' of Life," *Nichi Bei Times*, July 12, 2007, as reprinted in "The Many Faces of Manga" exhibit.

I created this comic strip to address everything that I had to go through growing up as a girl and a minority. My teachers and parents couldn't coach me through the racism I got as a child. And they couldn't explain why girls had to behave a certain way. It was just the way things were. So with this comic strip, I am able to make the observations I had growing up and as an adult. I draw this comic strip from this honest point of view because the candid truth was exactly what I wished I had growing up, not sanitized injustices operating as unspoken rules.<sup>38</sup>

Lee writes her comic for her younger self, as well as for other angry little girls and women who are frustrated with the pressures to conform to social norms and expectations. Lee's comics contain frequent expletives, and I imagine she would say “#\*@%!” to the notions of authenticity evoked in the “Photographic Memories” exhibit, insisting on recognition that such ideals in effect deny the lived realities and full humanity of marginalized people.

Osamu Tezuka, effectively a manga grandfather to several other artists included in the exhibition, was likewise concerned about the well being of vulnerable populations. Formerly a surgeon, he gave up his medical career to reach out to children in Japan in the aftermath of World War II. Philip Brophy, who curated a 2007 Asian Art Museum exhibit dedicated to Tezuka's career, describes Tezuka as “one of the first artists involved in the Second World War who was really committed to the idea of repairing trauma, not in adults, but children.”<sup>39</sup> As *Nichi Bei Times* reporter, Ben Hamamoto, explains:

Japan's imperialist ambitions took a horrible toll on its people. There was rampant child homelessness during that period and many children were left orphaned or deeply scarred both physically and emotionally from the atomic bombs and from U.S. carpet bombings of major cities.<sup>40</sup>

Tezuka sought to connect with this generation of children and to “show how children will survive by themselves,” as Brophy puts it.<sup>41</sup>

Tezuka did not gloss over the pain and ambivalence inherent in this survival, however. Like Lee, he sought to send a message that would resonate with his audience's

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<sup>38</sup> Lela Lee, exhibition text, “The Many Faces of Manga” exhibit.

<sup>39</sup> Hamamoto, “Tezuka, the Ambassador of Manga.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

lived realities. He did this in creating Astro Boy, a little cyborg, who is “an innocent, pure childlike being who is suffering incredible torment and the ravages of forces beyond [his] control and comprehension,” as Brophy describes the character.<sup>42</sup> Astro Boy fights and destroys “bad robots” but comes to realize that robots are only good or bad according to their human-designed programming; he is thus “continuously conflicted” even as he continues doing what he is designed to do.<sup>43</sup> Through Astro Boy, Tezuka showed that he understood the impossible situation post-war children were faced with—to realize their humanity in a world shaped by massive destruction and willful abuses of power. Like Astro Boy, who, though a robot, developed a conscience and struggled with moral ambiguity, Tezuka, a Buddhist, hoped for the transformation of Japan’s children. As Brophy explains, “Buddha is the story Tezuka’s always been telling. The protagonist starts off quite innocent, but then somehow attains a level of consciousness, enlightenment or realization...from their surroundings and is transformed.”<sup>44</sup> Questioning dualities, Tezuka sought to help Japanese children navigate the complex terrain of their difficult journeys and to gain understanding beyond that of warring ideologies. Ultimately, he can be seen as hoping to transform the vulnerability of these children’s liminal situation into an appreciation for the complexity of life and the challenges of realizing peace.

By including this story about Tezuka, “The Many Faces of Manga” offers a critique of dualisms and military aggression, a theme that appears throughout the exhibit. It is evident in illustrations from Willie Ito’s book *Hello Maggie*—one showing Christmas being celebrated, American style, by people of Japanese descent in a wartime concentration

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

camp, and another showing people reading a newspaper headline about the evacuation orders for people of Japanese descent. In an interview included in the exhibit, Bob Kuwahara describes how his 1940s comic strip, “Miki,” was based on his own sons—even named after one—though the characters were all white and Miki was meant to be “an average American lad.”<sup>45</sup> Fourth-generation Japanese American artist Adrian Tomine, author of the current, cult-favorite, graphic novel series, *Optic Nerve*, is featured in an exhibited *Nichi Bei Times* article and quoted as follows:

When I write my comics, I don’t ever try to create a character who will represent an entire group. Each character is supposed to be absolutely specific and singular. If a reader happens to see something of himself in a character, then that’s great, but I never set out to encapsulate a certain age or race or gender or whatever in one fictional character.<sup>46</sup>

Tak Toyoshima talks about a comic strip he published following 9/11, in which he had his main character, SAM (Secret Asian Man), say “F—k God!” reflecting the extent to which the comic artist was “sick and tired of the constant droning of ‘God Bless America.’”<sup>47</sup> There are no simple categories or loyalties or trajectories in the exhibit. Again and again we see examples of fluidity, ambivalence, ambiguity, and interconnectedness, quickly making it apparent that the NJAHS’s stated commitment to “authentic interpretation...of the Japanese American experience” does not reflect a nostalgic search for eclipsed origins but an ongoing negotiation of complex and entangled histories.

At the end of this project, I am again appreciating the opportunity museums provide to stop, step back, contemplate, and learn. Whereas I once spent time simply meditating on

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<sup>45</sup> Greg Robinson, “Bob Kuwahara’s Pioneer Comic Strip ‘Miki’ Broke New Ground,” *Nichi Bei Times*, July 12, 2007, as reprinted in “The Many Faces of Manga” exhibit.

<sup>46</sup> Greg Yano, “Adrian Tomine Strikes an (Optic) Nerve,” *Nichi Bei Times*, September 7, 2006, as reprinted in “The Many Faces of Manga” exhibit.

<sup>47</sup> Hamamoto, “The Secret’s Out!: Tak Toyoshima’s ‘Secret Asian Man’ Becomes First Asian American Lead Character to Be National Syndicated,” *Nichi Bei Times*, July 12, 2007, as reprinted in “The Many Faces of Manga” exhibit.

the formal qualities of a displayed image, I now recognize that much of an image's meaning is found outside of itself—in the motivations and methods through which it was made, the larger histories of which it is a part, the contexts it has inhabited, the purposes for which it has been enlisted, the interpretations that have been assigned to it, and the things it does *not* reflect—its null content. Images do not have fixed meanings; stories do not have static messages. Everything is subject to constant negotiation, whether that process is acknowledged or not. Everyone inhabits multiple worlds simultaneously, even if one is privileged above the others in a person's consciousness. In the words of Fumitaka Matsuoka, "to embrace [our liminal existence] is to receive the gift of courage to live in the midst of an unresolved and often ambiguous state of life."<sup>48</sup> The living of such a life inevitably becomes a transformative journey.

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<sup>48</sup> Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 62-63.