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Gail Dubrow with Donna Graves. *Sento at Sixth and Main: Preserving Landmarks of Japanese American Heritage.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002. 232 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98245-8.

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Popular History as Seduction

"Lovely" and "seductive" are seldom among the adjectives used to describe a non-fiction book distributed by an academic press. But *Sento at Sixth and Main*, a survey of buildings and places that served as hubs of Japanese American community life in the twentieth century, is, above all, lovely and seductive. Evocative photographs and illustrations fill its artfully designed pages, dominating short essays and spilling over into sidebars. The book feels like a precious object: it is just over five inches tall and eight inches wide, its format a quiet invocation of old photo albums and scrapbooks. Its proportions require that it be cradled in two hands, and turning one of its long pages takes an extra fraction of a second, slowing time ever so slightly. The book's presence and the nostalgic tug of its many archival images lend aura to the stories contained within. This aura, in turn, is a primary vehicle of persuasion for Gail Dubrow's central claim that the "tangible remains of Japanese American heritage" must be celebrated and preserved, lest their history be lost (p. 1).

Each of the ten chapters focuses on a particular site on the West Coast, the sequence of chapters charting a southward course from the Seattle area down to Los Angeles. Destinations consist of an old lumber camp, a farmstead, a general store, a community center and theater, a Japanese language school, the eponymous sento (public bathhouse), a Buddhist temple, a hospital and midwife's clinic, the Los Angeles neighborhood of Little Tokyo, and a postwar bowling alley. These sites serve as points of entry into narratives about the local communities they served and the significance of each place to its surrounding community. Emphasis is on the texture of life in spaces Japanese Americans created for themselves before and after WWII; no internment camps are on the itinerary, though the effects of wartime incarceration often enter discussion, mainly in terms of communities destroyed and an increasing impetus toward assimilation. Completing a broad trajectory, the chapters close with a brief discussion of the status of each site today.

A wealth of information, anecdote, and personal memories about the sites is presented in the engaging essays, eight by Dubrow, Professor of Urban Planning and Design at the University of Washington, and two by Donna Graves, a planner and writer. An exemplary essay introduces the world of Kokugo Gakko, a Seattle Japanese-language school in operation between 1902 and 1941, and again after 1956. Emphasizing the prewar period, Dubrow explains how the school not only taught the Japanese language but also served to discipline unruly American-born children. With the aid of oral testimonies, most notably a long excerpt from Monica Sone's 1953 memoir *Nisei Daughter*, a reader learns of the teachers' and funders' aspirations as well as the experiences of former students, who dallied on their way there and sometimes challenged their teachers. The story of intergenerational conflict is a familiar one, but it is vividly rendered.

One of the strengths of the essays is their attention to physical spaces. Kokugo Gakko and other buildings discussed by Dubrow are examples of vernacular American architecture: stylistically and structurally, there is nothing "Japanese" about them. Dubrow laudably considers the choices made by the Japanese American sponsors of these unornamented boxes, proposing, for instance, that the "neutral" design of a community center "may have marked [it] as a civic space with the potential to transcend the Japanese community and which had the potential to divide it by class, religion, and prefectural origin" (p. 73). Alternately, Dubrow suggests that vernacular forms might been adopted in response to exclusionism and pressure to assimilate. This was not always the response, though. Some buildings discussed in the book are derived from Japanese models, and Dubrow and Graves describe the styles and genealogies of these buildings without consideration of their significance. Despite this missed opportunity, the authors' preliminary exam-

inations of built space suggest avenues for further study that could shed light on patterns of exclusion or the complexity of Japanese American communities.

Sento at Sixth and Main presents a treasure trove of images: there are archival photographs; recent photographs of sites and people discussed in the narratives; hand-drawn maps and plan views of sites as people remember them; reproductions of merchandise catalogs and other ephemera; and images from books such as a midwifery text and 1937 etiquette manual. As is so often the case in history texts and museum displays, images are presented here not as objects or texts that warrant analysis, or the presentation of which warrants analysis, but more conventionally, as windows onto the world and triggers for sentiment. Of the nearly 150 photographs in the book only one is examined at any length, and then to point out the significance of objects appearing in the frame and the context in which it was shot. Oral interviews are treated in much the same way as photographs, as if their meaning and truth were self-evident.

Images serve two central functions in this book, beyond simple visual appeal. If body text rarely engages directly with image, the two still work together, each augmenting the mnemonic and affective power of the other. Photography also serves to extend the discussions beyond specific sites, making them apply to all similar sites, ultimately, perhaps, to the whole diaspora or even all immigrant experience. While a majority of photographs represent people, places, and things discussed in the writing, many depict things only typologically similar to or vaguely associated with those discussed. Photographs from other lumber camps anchor a chapter on the Selleck lumber camp; photographs of a Seattle produce vendor and a number of different Japanese American farms crop, unannounced in the chapter on a specific farm; studio portraits of anonymous Japanese American or Japanese Canadian children (the citation suggests it could be either) taken from a 1918 book float across an essay on a California midwifery. While this loose, often atmospheric use of photographs implies that Japanese America is a larger community, extending far beyond the ten sites discussed here, its foregrounding of pathos and similitude also suggests a comfortable Family-of-Man strain of humanism.

Given the brevity of the essays, the way images are used, and the tendency for colorful anecdote to overshadow analysis, many worthwhile questions are raised but left unanswered. The Selleck Historic District, a former lumber camp, is, according to Dubrow, "a great untapped resource for educating the public about the dynamics of race, class, ethnicity, and gender within American labor history" (p. 23). But which dynamics? One learns that Japanese workers were segregated and given the most menial work, and a valuable paragraph explains the role of the bookman, the go-between who recruited and supervised Japanese labor. One also learns about daily life–what people ate, who supplied their provisions, what they did in their leisure time, that wives cooked and did laundry. Beyond that, class struggle and relations among workers of different ethnicities merit only a statement that using Japanese labor afforded bosses "distance from the kinds of unrest brought by labor unions (p. 11). After Dubrow's provocative claim, I hoped the site would have been tapped for answers to some initial questions: what was the range of relationships among Japanese and non-Japanese workers? Did the IWW or other unions have a presence among Japanese workers at any of the lumbering camps depicted in this chapter? Can the lively descriptions of everyday life also be made to shed light on the "dynamics of race, class," etc.? And, finally, can attention to gender not mean more than describing women's gendered labor and noting that their soaking tubs at a bathhouse were smaller than the men's? Alas, though Dubrow packs a great deal of information into her five-page essay on Selleck, questions of this sort are beyond its scope.

Sento at Sixth and Main continues the work of Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place*, which advocated urban preservation and public art projects aimed at memorializing the lives and experiences of workers, women, and people in ethnic and racial communities. Both the strengths as well as the limitations of Hayden's project are evident in *Sento at Sixth and Main*. Both texts tell stories that are not widely known, attend to populations whose histories have been under-represented, consider the social dimensions of space, and encourage community building through innovative works of public history. At the same time, both tend to treat memory and heritage as givens to be affirmed and related, not engaged with critically. Hayden made only nods to theory, giving it short shrift on the grounds that her audience included preservationists, artists, and other people outside academia.[1] Dubrow, whose text is targeted at a similar but even broader audience, dispenses with theory altogether. Instead, she argues that historic preservation should utilize "the sharper lens of multicultural awareness" (p. 41). In practice, this means the stories of non-Anglos, workers, and women are told in fairly conventional, predictable ways, however striking the design. "Multicultural awareness" is here a wide-angle lens, not a sharper lens. This raises a final question related to the

highly accessible and highly seductive *Sento*: while making works accessible and appealing, and avoiding jargon and impenetrable writing can be desirable, must analysis be in direct proportion to the academic rank of readers? Or, to put it another way, once the appeal lures in the crowd, can they not be challenged rather than just reassured?

The seductive loveliness of *Sento at Sixth and Main*, which owes so much to Karen Cheng's design, has its dangers but also its uses. As a lower-division or even high school teaching text the book could be extremely valuable, since it offers a general overview of Japanese American social history, excepting WWII, and succeeds in bringing history to life, a goal toward which so many teachers and textbooks strive. It could very well inculcate a love of history and, read critically, inspire students to dig deeper and interrogate its cozy, if often bittersweet, narratives. *Sento at Sixth and Main* is as much curated as it is written or edited, the images functioning like the contents of carefully lit vitrines, the essays like a well-crafted docent tour supplemented by recorded snippets of oral testimonies. For visceral delights and fascinating information, the passage through this exhibition in book form is well worth the time.

Note

[1]. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1995), p. xii.

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