“To Become Something New Yet Familiar:” Remembering, Moving, and Re-membering in Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori Festival

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

The *Bon Odori* festival is part of a period of mid-summer observance called *Obon* during which departed members of family and community are honored. This thesis examines the Bon Odori festival at Seattle Buddhist Church (a *Jōdo Shinshū* temple), exploring embodied ways of remembering the past and performative processes of re-membering community in the present through the participatory dancing on which the event is centered. Employing historical ethnomusicological and phenomenological modes of analysis in addition to contemplating the politics of expressive culture, this study considers how dancers engage with personal histories even as they participate in commemorating and continuing Bon Odori’s nearly century-long history in the Pacific Northwest region. Repetition of a core repertoire of dances links the individual’s body memory of these familiar favorites to previous generations of performers, fostering an orientation of *okagesamade*, or respectful appreciation that one’s life is made possible because of others. As both participant demographics and preferred aesthetics change over time, curatorial moves on the part of festival organizers and creative engagement on the part of participants make Bon Odori an annual opportunity to (re)negotiate and (re)perform individual and collective identities. The various combinations of religious, ethnic, cultural, and social meaning that accrue to the festival are as diverse as the individuals who participate in this multiply framed event. Bon Odori reflects a shared
motivation to commemorate the past and re-member, or cohere, a sense of self and a
sense of community in the present through participatory performance.
Dedication

To my grandparents.
Acknowledgments

In the words of Tomie Hahn, “fieldwork can be a dance of disorientation” (2006, 88). Support from many individuals and institutions ensured that my fieldwork was instead a meaningful learning experience.

I am indebted to the leaders and members of the Seattle Buddhist Church, Tacoma Buddhist Temple, and White River Buddhist Temple for sharing so generously of their time and talent. My gratitude to Reverends Don Castro and Jim Warrick from Seattle Buddhist Church, Reverend Kojo Kakihara from Tacoma Buddhist Temple, and Reverend Koshin Ogui from White River Buddhist Temple. I have great respect for the work and leadership of Gwen Kawabata Florence and Ron Hamakawa in making Seattle’s 81st Bon Odori a success.

The individuals who helped me in this endeavor are too numerous to name, but I would like to acknowledge in particular the warmth and expertise of Elsie “Leilani” Taniguchi, Wanda (Seiko) Miyahara, Nadine Miyahara, Debbie Kashino, Tyler Moriguchi, Meryl Tsukiji, Fumiko Uyeda Groves, and Stanley Shikuma. Thank you especially to Satoru “Sat” Ichikawa, Miyoko Kaneta, and Michiye and Thomas Kiyoshi Ohtani for sharing your stories with me.
This project benefited from the ongoing good work of the following organizations:

Denshō, the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Washington, the Seattle Nisei Veterans Committee Foundation, and the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience.

I am deeply grateful for the guidance, encouragement, and patience of my advisor, Dr. Ryan T. Skinner, not only during the preparation of this thesis but throughout my graduate career. I am also grateful for the support of The Ohio State University School of Music, particularly in the form of an Ethnomusicology Field Research Grant for the summer of 2013. Special thanks to Dr. Thomas P. Kasulis for sharing his knowledge of Japanese philosophy and religion with me.

Finally, thank you to the dance instructors from whom I learned and the many participants who made Bon Odori in 2013 a Gathering of Joy.

In recognition of all of this assistance, okagesamade.
Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Music
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Introduction

*The summertime would be strange without song or dance,*

*Bon Odori makes me feel alive...*¹

In Japan and in Japanese-diasporic communities throughout the United States, Canada, and South America, there is a mid-summer period called *Obon* dedicated to commemorating one’s ancestors and members of the community who have passed away.²

Obon comprises both the solemn and the celebratory, from temple and cemetery memorial services to participatory folk dance-centered festivals known as *Bon Odori.*³

*Bon Odori* festival practice in the United States is most strongly associated with Buddhist temples in the *Jōdo Shinshū* school of Pure Land Buddhism (also known as *Shin Buddhism*) and varies regionally due to the migration patterns of the *Issei* (or first-generation immigrants) to Hawaii and the West Coast.⁴ Though several

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¹ The epigraphs used throughout this document are drawn from the lyrics of “Seattle Omoide” (a song and dance composed to honor the 75th anniversary of Bon Odori in Seattle), which is discussed in detail in the conclusion of this thesis.
³ How the participatory folk dance festival that is part of Obon is referred to depends on local convention. Options include “*Obon festival,*” “*Bon festival,*” “*Bon dance*” (particularly in Hawai’i), or “*Bon Odori.*” The dances themselves are also referred to as “*bon odori.*” At Seattle Buddhist Church, the festival is called “*Bon Odori*” in promotional materials to distinguish the weekend festival from the larger Obon period. I will do the same in this thesis to reflect my interlocutors’ practice.
⁴ As Akiwama (1989) explains, “all Japanese Buddhist sects in the United States observe Obon although not all hold bon odori as part of the observance. Each Buddhist sect interprets the meaning of Obon and the reason for the rituals according to the basic premises of their sect” (95-96). The *Jōdo Shinshū* reading of Obon and Bon Odori is briefly explored later in this introduction. There are cases of Bon Odori festivals in the United States not affiliated with a *Jōdo Shinshū* temple. Bon Odori dance demonstrations were promoted as tourist attractions in Hawaii (even held in shopping mall parking lots) in the 1950s through the
ethnomusicologists and dance scholars have written about Bon Odori in Hawaii and California, little scholarly attention has been paid to the festival’s iterations in the Pacific Northwest. This thesis explores Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church, using historical materials to inform an ethnographic study of that community’s 81st Bon Odori in the summer of 2013. Participants in Bon Odori (also known as Kangi-e, or “Gathering of Joy”), engage with personal histories, honoring parents and grandparents as they commemorate and continue the event’s nearly century-long history in the Pacific Northwest region. Choreographed dancing with the past in the present becomes both an opportunity to remember and re-member, or cohere, personal and collective identities.

This introduction will first provide an orientation to the festival space of Seattle Buddhist Church’s 2013 event. The origins of the practice, the literature on Bon Odori, and the methods used for this study will briefly be discussed before a closing overview of the structure, content, and key arguments of this thesis is provided.

**Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church**

At Seattle Buddhist Church, Bon Odori consists of two days of celebration, typically on the third weekend of July. After a short afternoon temple service, dances are

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70s (Van Zile 1982), for example, and in Olympia, Washington, there has been a Bon Odori promoted as “a secular version of the traditional Japanese festival” for 27 years.

5 Festival organizers count from the first officially organized large-scale Bon Odori in Seattle, which took place in the summer of 1932. However, as chapter 1’s history will explore, there were several years of hiatus which are not accounted for in this calculation. For organizers and for participants, the “81st” label conveys the continuity and tradition – real, imagined, or somewhere in between – that do the work of binding Bon Odori’s present to the past.

6 The Seattle Buddhist Church will be referred to as such in this document (in keeping with their website), though it is also known as the Seattle Buddhist Temple and the Seattle Betsuin. As chapter 1 explains, the shift from “temple” to “church” in the institution’s name reflected a broader program of Americanization in U.S. Jōdo Shinshū temples in the early decades of the 20th century. “Betsuin” refers to Seattle Buddhist Church’s recognition in 1954 as a direct branch of the Kyoto-based head temple of the Nishi Honganji
performed through evening in the street outside the temple in a circle stretching nearly the length of two city blocks. In addition to dance, attendees enjoy live taiko performances (from Seattle Matsuri Taiko, Kumi Daiko, Tacoma Fuji Taiko, and other area ensembles), historical and artistic exhibitions, food, and open house tours of the temple space. The event is open to all, from the very young to the very old, from the expert dancer to the complete novice, from the Sangha (temple community) member to the non-Buddhist participant. There are designated dance leaders (dressed in matching kimono) one can watch for models of best practice, as well as open rehearsals one can attend to refine one’s performance of the dances. Neither skill level, lack of affiliation with the temple, nor ethnic or cultural identification is reason to exclude someone from participation. Dancers’ attire ranges from full kimono, to the lightweight cotton yukata more typical in Japanese summer festivals, to the simple happi coat, to street clothes. Several concentric rings of dancers assemble around the yagura, a raised platform from which an announcer addresses the crowd and the head dance leader and choreographer directs the activities. Also on the yagura is the odaiko, the largest of the taiko drums, which is played along with the typically recorded and sometimes live music whenever a dance is in progress to help coordinate the dancers’ motions.

Since these are folk dances, the individual motions are simple – a hand wave, a step, a turn, a clap – and are linked into a longer phrase pattern that is repeated for the duration of the song. Dance and song themes include love, labor, and location, recently composed pieces sometimes depicting the local temple community and older ones.

denomination of Jōdo Shinshū. The status of Betsuin is an honor conferred on only a few temples in the United States based on historical, geographical, and size considerations.
referring to the prefecture in Japan where they originated. Some songs are self-referential, expressing the happiness of festival dancing and music making or explaining the religious significance of Bon Odori. The choreographic phrases sometimes evoke a particular activity, from mining coal in the beloved “Tankō Bushi,” to playing baseball in “Yakyu Ken” in the style of former Seattle Mariner Ichiro Suzuki. Some dances also require the use of props such as round and folding fans (uchiwa and sensu), small cotton towels (tenugui), cherry blossom branches, castanettes (kachi-kachi), and accessories with blinking lights (usually rings).

Though there is an elegance that comes with practice, the primary goal of the dancing is participation rather than aesthetic perfection. There is an oft-quoted saying about Bon Odori that, in the words of 2013 festival chairperson Ron Hamakawa, goes something like: “You’re a fool if you dance, you’re a fool if you don’t dance, so you might as well dance” (qtd. in Griswold 2009).

Festival organizers rotate the dances performed from year to year, with the exception of a core group of standards that are always included. There is typically a new dance or two added each year. These may be newly choreographed, inspired by dance repertoire from other temples in the United States, or given to the community by a minister and composer from Osaka (Reverend Koran Okahashi, see chapter 2) who writes new pieces every few years for temples along the West Coast. The 16 dances performed at Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori in the summer of 2013 are outlined in Table 1 on the following page.
### Core repertoire:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Props used</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mi Kokoro</td>
<td></td>
<td>Opening dance. Dedicated to Shinran Shonin, the founder of Jōdo Shinshū. Participants bow with palms together (gasshō). Fisherman’s dance from Hokkaido. Coal miner’s dance from Fukuoka Prefecture. Closing dance from Shiga Prefecture. One of the oldest in Seattle’s repertoire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sōran Bushi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tankō Bushi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gōshū Ondo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### New dances for 2013:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Props used</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mottainai</td>
<td>tenegui</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle Shamisen Slide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Dances selected from a rotating repertoire:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Props used</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dai Hiroshima Ondo</td>
<td>uchiwa</td>
<td>Performed to live musical accompaniment. A fireworks dance composed by Okahashi. Composed in 2007 for the 75th anniversary of Bon Odori in Seattle. Written by a minister in Oahu. An unofficial addition to this year’s program by popular request.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Tōkyō Ondo</td>
<td>flashing lights sensu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fukushima Ondo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hanabi Ondo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanagasa Ondo</td>
<td>cherry blossoms kachi-kachi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oyama Ondo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sakura Ondo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Seattle Omoide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shiawase Samba</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Props used</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. Dances for the 2013 Seattle Buddhist Church Bon Odori Festival**

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7 Miyamoto is a composer and performer, dancer and choreographer, actress and producer, teacher and scholar whose vision of the intersection of arts and activism currently manifests in the organization Great Leap. “Mottainai” is an “environmental music video” produced by Great Leap in 2011 with music by Miyamoto. She also choreographed a dance to go with the song for Bon Odori festivals, traveling to Seattle Buddhist Church in the spring of 2013 to lead a workshop in the dance. “Mottainai” resonated strongly with Seattle Buddhist Church’s Rev. Don Castro, who has written and spoken in recent years about Buddhism’s environmental imperatives. Miyamoto has a long history of writing for Bon Odori and has a particularly strong collaborative relationship with Rev. Masao Kodani of Los Angeles’ Senshin Buddhist Temple in this regard (see Kodani 1999 for examples of Bon Odori music and dance co-created by Miyamoto and Kodani).
Though the genesis of Bon Odori and its dances is not the focus of this thesis, it is necessary to contextualize these and other Obon practices before progressing any further in an analysis of the contemporary festival in Seattle. It is particularly important to show that Bon Odori’s complexity today is not a recent development; indeed, this event has always existed in the messy in-between of the sacred and the secular, defying that very dichotomy through a syncretic combination of religious and folk, real and imagined histories and practices. Though unique to an American context in several key ways (to be explored further in chapter 1), the multiplicity of meanings circulating in the dance space of contemporary Japanese-American Bon Odori festivals has a precedent.

Common evocations of origins point to a particular sutra as being the inspiration for a celebratory remembrance of the dead through dance. The *Ullambana* sutra (Sanskrit; *Urabon* in Japanese, from which the abbreviation *Bon* is derived) recounts the story of Maudgalyāyana (also spelled Mogallana; Mokuren in Japanese), one of the Buddha Śākyamuni’s close disciples. The Reverend Masao Kodani of Los Angeles’ Senshin Buddhist Temple retells the story as follows. Upset upon seeing his mother suffering in the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts for her life of self-interest, Mokuren “save[d] his deceased mother…by struggling to understand the *Buddhadharma* and by making the offerings to the *Sangha* at the end of the rainy season…He danced for joy upon realizing the release of his mother from her hellish condition” (1999, 7). However, as Kasulis (2004) indicates, this sutra arrived in Japan in Chinese translation. And because no Sanskrit original has been found, the sutra text “is hypothesized to be of Chinese origin […] written as Buddhism’s response to its new cultural context, where
venerating ancestors had already been a firmly established tradition for many centuries” (78). Indeed, due to how readily Obon “became enmeshed with indigenous festivals” as Buddhism spread to Japan, Bon Odori has had Shintō, Confucian, and folk elements incorporated into it over the course of its history in Japan (Van Zile 1982, 1). Various syncretic practices drawing on the story from the sutra also arose in other countries in which Mahayana Buddhism was present, including China, Korea, and Vietnam (Kodani 1999, 7).

In addition to dancing, Obon in Japan traditionally comprised a range of activities blending religious significance, folk and family traditions, and sociability: placing a *shōryōdana* (or “spirit altar”) in front of the *butsudan* (Buddhist family altar), cleaning and making offerings at family gravesites, listening to priestly recitation of sutras (*tanagyō*), participating in special services (*segaki*), lighting welcome (*mukaebi*) and farewell (*okuribi*) fires to mark the beginning and end of the period, and floating lanterns to represent sending the spirits back to their own world (*tōrō-nagashi*) (Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan; Van Zile 1982, 2). Local and prefectural variations in ritual and repertoire lent diversity to practice.

Historians cite 657 A.D. as the first year Obon was observed in Japan, with festivals continuing annually ever since. Bon Odori dancing, which is unique to the Japanese version of Obon, is thought to have developed from *Nembutsu Odori*, the popular late-Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) period dances accompanied by the chanting of the *nembutsu* (“*Namo Amida Butsu*,” or, “I take refuge in Amida

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8 The following historical overview draws from Kodani’s concise history of the practice in Japan (1999, 7-8 and 15) and the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*. A more detailed consideration of origins may be found in Akiyama’s work on Bon Odori in California (1989, 97-105).
Buddha) or the singing of *wasan* (Buddhist hymns). This practice “express[ed] the joyfulness of those whose faith assures them salvation, through the chanting or singing of the Buddha Amida’s name” (Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan). References to Bon Odori festivals with dances to *min'yō* folk songs do not specifically appear in Japanese writings until the late 15th century, though “by the Edo period [1603-1867] it was a widespread national custom characterized by considerable local variation” in both dance and musical repertoire (Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan).9

Especially popular in farming communities, Bon Odori was banned in the late Meiji Period (1867-1912) because it did not fit with the imperial project of modernization and Westernization. The freedom of the festival environment “was thought to encourage immoral behavior, especially among the unmarried youth who were permitted to fraternize unchaperoned” (Kodani 1999, 8). When it was once again allowed in the Taisho Period (1912-1926), Bon Odori’s “resurgence [along with many other] things Japanese” represented a new creative opportunity (8). New compositions incorporated “Western” instrumentation (orchestral accompaniment with strings and brass) for appeal to urban Japanese. Kodani (1999) argues that this period also saw the solidification of two popular types of Bon Odori: *bushi* and *ondo*. The former is a general term for a variety of “light” folk songs, usually about a particular region. The latter has a particular form: “a lead soloist who is answered by a chorus singing a refrain, hence the name *ondo*, which means ‘taking the lead note or verse’” (15). Social and cultural significance have largely replaced the religious significance of Bon Odori today in Japan. Yet Obon and the

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9 *Min'yō* can mean both (rurally originating) folk song and (choreographed) folk dance. For a discussion of the musical category “*min'yō,*” its history, and its manifestations in contemporary Japan, see Hughes 2008. In his references to regional and event-specific repertoires, Hughes includes information about Bon Odori singing and *min'yō* performance.
New Year remain “the two high points of the Japanese festival calendar [when] custom strongly urges all members of a family, no matter how scattered, to gather together to honor their ancestors” (Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan).

As chapter 1’s history of practice in the Pacific Northwest will make clear, Bon Odori in the United States became a distinct religio-cultural expression in its diasporic context. With a new location arose new associations, needs, and opportunities.\(^{10}\) Reverend Yoshio Iwanaga, whose life and artistry has been detailed by Akiyama (1989), played a major role in shaping Bon Odori as a *Jōdo Shinshū* Buddhist practice made local for a new context.\(^{11}\) As Kodani explains, Bon Odori’s strong affiliation with *Jōdo Shinshū* Buddhism, which represented the majority of Japanese-American Buddhists, was unique to its American manifestation. In Japan, temples of other Buddhist sects observed Bon Odori in Japan, but their interpretation of spirits of the dead returning during Obon did not fit with *Jōdo Shinshū* teaching:

> The idea of disembodied spirits and the efficacy of making offerings to them is a deep-rooted belief in Japan. The idea of disembodied souls however, is largely relegated to the realm of superstition or at best, not essential to religion by Jodo Shinshu. […] The Japanese-American acceptance of Bon Odori is largely due to the relative absence of the idea of disembodied souls among Japanese-

\(^{10}\) Terminology has changed in American usage as well. In the United States, according to Akiyama, a Bon Odori dance is referred to as such (*bon odori*) if it is performed in the Obon festival context. It is referred to generally as *min'yō* (1989, 115) or *ondo* (Kodani 1999, 15) if performed in a non-Buddhist context, such as a secular festival or public artistic demonstration. In a “uniquely Japanese-American invention,” the word *ondo* has also shifted in meaning from a distinct musical form to “street dancing” or “dance” (Kodani 1999, 15).

\(^{11}\) Rev. Iwanaga’s contributions to Bon Odori practice in the United States, including in Seattle, will be discussed in chapter 1. Akiyama notes that “all Japanese Buddhist sects in the United States observe Obon [but] not all hold bon odori as part of the observance. Each Buddhist sect interprets the meaning of Obon and the reason for the rituals according to the basic premises of their sect” (1989, 95-96). Iwanaga’s creation of a distinctly *Jōdo Shinshū* Bon Odori did not preclude broader participation in the event, however. As Akiyama observed in California and as I observed in Seattle, “many Japanese Americans, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, participate in Obon as a celebration of their Japanese heritage. It is a reoccurring topic of discussion at Jodo Shinshu temples as to what extent Obon should represent Japanese American culture and to what extent it should be viewed strictly as a religious observance” (96).
Americans and to the attraction of the Bon Odori as a cultural link to an ethnic past. Bon Odori has thus come to have a strong Jodoshinshu connection which has moved away from the traditional meaning of making offerings to the souls of one’s ancestors towards a more Buddhistic view of acknowledging our ongoing relations with those who have died, remembering them in gratitude, and the ongoing attempt to reach a state of egoless dancing – to just dance. (7)

My concern in this thesis is not with authenticating origins, imagined or real, but rather in examining how people engage with tradition in the present to “remember…in gratitude” in Bon Odori. Seattle Buddhist Church’s Reverend Don Castro reflected along these lines in a 2001 message to the temple community. The meaning of Obon, he writes, lies not in the historical truth of the story of Mokuren conveyed in the Urabon sutra:

[T]he story of Obon is a legend, as are most, if not all, of the Buddhist scriptures. A story does not have to be historically true to be spiritually true. […] So, what is the Obon Sutra telling us? Truly, a world of everyone out for themselves alone would be hell – if not outright impossible. Only through countless acts of selfless giving is the world able to exist. […] At Obon, we are mindful (not ignoring) of the many, many selfless acts of kindness we receive, especially by those closest to us who have passed away. Let us not make the mistake of Mogallana’s mother, however, and dwell only on our life and family. Of course, we express our gratitude to them but we should be ever mindful that all life is the Sangha that supports us and to whom we are related in pleasure and pain. […] Obon is a celebration of life deeply colored by our personal humility and gratitude; humility in the awareness that I can’t make it by myself and gratitude for the power of others that enables me to live.

Positioning this work

Major English-language scholarship on Bon Odori in the United States began with Barbara Smith’s 1962 article in the *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* discussing the festival in Hawaii and Japan. The most concentrated examination of American Bon Odori took place in the late 1970s through the 80s in the fields of ethnomusicology and dance studies. This collection of scholarship comprises one published volume complete with Labanotation of several dances (Judy Van Zile’s 1982
The Japanese Bon Dance in Hawaii) and three Master’s theses: Jo Anne Combs’ “The Japanese O-Bon Festival and Bon Odori: Symbols in Flux” (1979), Christine Yano’s “Japanese Bon Dance Music in Hawai‘i: Continuity, Change, and Variability” (1984), and Linda Akiyama’s “Reverend Yoshio Iwanaga and the Early History of Doyo Buyo and Bon Odori in California” (1989). These ethnographic studies (Smith and Yano from ethnomusicology; Akiyama, Combs, and Van Zile from dance studies) focus mainly on exploring a dichotomy of continuity and change, usually with a heavy emphasis on transcription of both music and dance. A comparative approach is also common, either between larger geographic areas (e.g. Hawaii and Japan for Smith; California, Hawaii, and Japan for Combs) or between multiple temple sites in a particular region (e.g. on the Hawaiian islands for Van Zile and Yano). Akiyama’s work is unique in that it profiles a single key individual who helped establish the tradition in the United States, tracing his travels throughout the West Coast.

Beyond this core literature which takes Bon Odori as the focal point of investigation is a set of materials that reference Bon Odori in Japan or the United States in the context of another research topic or disciplinary orientation. Charles Keil (1984) uses one visit to a Tōkyō Bon Odori festival as a case study in his exploration of mediation and liveness in Japanese musical practice. Rebecca King-O’Riain (2007) briefly mentions Seattle’s Bon Odori her discussion of the Japanese Queen Scholarship Organization of Washington in Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants. Henry Johnson’s (2008) ethnographic study of Okinawan Eisā dance discusses Bon Odori as the traditional context of this regionally-specific style before considering Eisā’s changing significance in more recent secular competition and tourism contexts.
Finally, several essayists in the 2012 collection *Colors of Confinement* engage with Bon Odori as practiced and represented photographically in World War II incarceration camps. Both preceding and paralleling scholarly treatment of Bon Odori, coverage of the festival occurred and continues in popular (e.g. city newspapers) and local (e.g. Japanese-American community newspapers and temple bulletins) presses.

The most recent work considering Bon Odori in its American context has been done by Minako Waseda (2004; 2005; 2010; 2013). Her work centers on comparisons between festival practice in Hawaii and southern California (2004; 2010) and analysis of music making in Japanese-American incarceration camps (2005; 2013). Her 2013 piece is a contribution to the *Denshō Encyclopedia*, one component of the Seattle-based Japanese American legacy project which also includes an online learning center and digital archive.

With the exception of King-O’Riain’s brief reference to the Seattle festival and Ronald Magden’s documentation of Bon Odori in the early and post-war decades of temple life in his comprehensive history of the Seattle Buddhist Church (2008), no scholarly attention has been paid to the festival’s iterations in the Pacific Northwest (comprising Washington, Oregon, and the west coast of Canada). This thesis takes one step toward addressing this lacuna by offering a detailed examination of Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori, informed by ethnographic research at this temple and two others (the Tacoma and White River Buddhist Temples) that form a small Bon Odori circuit in Washington State. Though each temple community hosting a Bon Odori festival is interested in making the event an expression of itself, the Seattle temple is the leader among these three. Tacoma and White River follow most of Seattle’s annual decisions
about music and dance repertoire and choreography, and the Seattle event is both the oldest and the largest. Seattle Buddhist Church is also Washington State’s only Betsuin and is thus seen as a regional hub for Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists (see p. 2n6). In addition, the affiliation of Seattle’s Bon Odori with a citywide summer festival series called Seafair raises some interesting questions about multiculturalism and the politics of representation.

Methods

The ethnographic materials represented in this thesis are drawn from two months of fieldwork in Seattle, Tacoma, and Auburn (the location of the White River Buddhist Temple) during the summer of 2013. In addition to participant observation of the Bon Odori festivals in these three locations, I attended and participated in dance and music rehearsals, temple services, preparatory activities, and relevant additional events (including the Seafair Pow Wow and Seattle’s annual “From Hiroshima to Hope” memorial event); conducted individual and group interviews (with event organizers, community leaders, and participants); and gathered audio and visual documentation (including video and still photography). I also consulted archival sources through Denshō, the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, and the Library of Congress’ digitized collection of Japanese-American incarceration camp newspapers.

Since Bon Odori involves several expressive cultural practices, a study of it must be inherently interdisciplinary. This thesis is thus positioned at the intersection of ethnomusicology, dance studies, and folklore, and is informed by voices from the archive.
and from the field. My work is grounded in the idea that expressive culture does more than serve as an entry point for a scholarly consideration of larger social, cultural, and political issues, but indeed that expressive culture is instrumental in creating, mediating, and sustaining efforts at identity and community formation. I am interested in what a community does with a tradition – or the idea of tradition itself – in a given sociopolitical context to strengthen itself and tactically engage in self-representation. I also recognize a reflexive imperative in ethnographic work (see Jackson 1998; Ruskin and Rice 2012; Titon 2002), which I honor by writing my presence as an ethnographer into this text through the inclusion of expanded fieldnote excerpts.

Those involved in the study of festivals and their expressive cultural practices cannot remain onlookers, as one of Dorothy Noyes’ interlocutors reminded her at the Berguedan Patum festival: “What do you think this is, theater? You can’t understand the Patum by looking at it” (2003, 26). Bon Odori is meant to be danced, and this obligation extended to me as well. In chapter 2’s exploration of the phenomenology of Bon Odori dancing, I thus engage in what Aaron Turner has called “embodied ethnography” (2000). In text as in life, here the ethnographer is an “embodied, sensing, acting, socially situated participant,” not a disembodied “analytical consciousness” attempting a study of others’ embodied processes from an artificial distance (53). Turner explains the benefits of such an approach:

The focus on processes that the anthropologist is directly involved in…allows her/him to interrogate processes from the position of experience of embodied negotiation in which reality and social order are discovered and constituted. Consequently, the anthropologist’s participation becomes the object of study rather than a variable to be controlled for through analytic reflexivity. (55)
Moving with others in rehearsal and festival, I not only learned the basics of the dances that were on the roster for the summer. I learned how to move in them, how to cultivate my own bodily practice in response to a growing awareness of that “universe of mutual interconnectedness-and-dependence” brought to the forefront in Obon (Castro 2001).

As I engaged in Bon Odori’s expressive cultural practices, several questions arose. What is the relationship between memory as embodied in Bon Odori and the history of the practice and of the Japanese-American community in the region? What is the phenomenology of teaching and learning in this context, and what kinds of orientations to experience are being encouraged and fostered? What identity or identities are being forged in Bon Odori’s concentric rings of dancers? How is the event framed? As religious ritual; public festival; cultural, ethnic, or racial performance; or social space in which to see and be seen? Does the Seafair connection represent a problematic exoticizing move being made under the umbrella of a city-sanctioned project of multiculturalism? Is this promoting a kind of ‘at home’ cultural tourism? What are the representational politics involved? What potential and what peril might lie in turning an inherently participatory practice into a presentational one?

Organization of the thesis

In an exploration of these questions and their often complicated answers, this thesis adopts a tripartite structure, with chapters entitled “Remembering,” “Moving,” and “Re-membersing.” The choice of the gerund form of these titles stresses the active, ongoing nature of the processes they describe and emphasizes that this document can only offer a glimpse of “symbols in flux” in 2013’s festival practice (Combs 1979).
Chapter 1, “Remembering,” examines the history of Bon Odori in the Pacific Northwest, focusing in particular on key individuals involved in Seattle Buddhist Church’s festival. This chapter outlines the “what” of history to inform the interpretation of present practice, its historical ethnomusicological approach also making an argument about the established role of expressive culture in this community as a means of finding coherence after changes – some of them traumatic – in collective life. Commemoration in Bon Odori is shown to be a fundamentally social act that implicates the present as much as it involves the past. As Victor Turner has written, “it is in bringing past and present into ‘musical relation’ that the process of discovering and establishing ‘meaning’ consists. [I]t is not enough to possess a meaning for oneself; an experience is never truly completed until it is ‘expressed’” (1982, 14). In Bon Odori, “history…[becomes] not something simply to know but something to do, something with which to become involved” through (ritual) performance (Emoff 2002, 107).

Chapter 2, “Moving,” speaks to this process of becoming involved. Taking up Aaron Turner’s charge to engage in embodied ethnography, and inspired by the example of Tomie Hahn’s ethnography of nihon buyo (Japanese classical dance) transmission (2007), I reflect upon teaching and learning in Bon Odori as opportunities to cultivate an ethico-moral orientation to human experience through bodily practice. This chapter examines the curatorial moves on the part of festival organizers that enable this cultivation and the creative responses of festival participants that express it.

My use of “embodied” must be qualified briefly here to avoid the danger of suggesting a subscription to still entrenched Cartesian ideas about the separation of the cogito from the physical body. As one of the critiques of speaking of embodied...
experiences is that doing so implies such dualism, I want to clarify my use of that term. My use of “embodied” in this thesis is meant to restore the physical body to a place of importance in the analysis of human experience after centuries of the domination of the mind in Western philosophy. Like Hahn, I am interested in what happens in that “gray-blue area where body and spirit converge and manifest as embodied knowledge” (2006, 92). So, for example, speaking of embodied processes of remembering calls attention to modalities of memory that are not purely in the cognitive realm. Chapter 2’s engagement with the work of Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yasuo ([1977] 1987) explores these ideas further.

Chapter 3, “Re-membering,” makes use of a term employed by both Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2009) and Edward Casey (2000) to convey the cohering properties of memory “in the world.” Casey writes:

[W]e are…beyond ourselves in our own memories. Instead of sucking us into a tight container of the mind or the brain, memories take us continually outside ourselves; and they do so in the very midst of the enactment of their own distinctive in-gathering action. […] And making us as they do, these same memories take us out of ourselves and into the world; or more exactly, they show us that we have always already been there – and precisely in and through remembering itself. Think of it: memory not in brain or mind but in the world, and thus in the things that belong to the world such as lived bodies, places, and other people. (309-10)

This chapter considers the messiness of being in the world of Bon Odori, an event that is multiply framed as ritual, cultural and ethnic performance, and public festival. I explore the various dances of re-membering that cohere particular identities, allowing participants to perform their religiously-, (multi)culturally-, and/or ethnically-inflected social positions even as they are in the process of being negotiated.
Participants’ engagement with expressive culture effects personal and collective remembering and re-membering as, in the words of Reverend Kodani, Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church “become[s] something new yet familiar” each year (1999, 13).
Chapter 1: Remembering

_I nod to friends and to those who have passed away,
Sensei Kiki dances next to me,
On this happy day..._

_Introduction_

The purpose of this chapter is to outline a history of the Bon Odori festival in Seattle as an important site for identity politics negotiation in response to several major historical shifts. There is not a single Japanese-American experience, and the groups of individuals referred to with the labels “Japanese American” or “(_Jōdo Shinshū_ Buddhist)” are neither homogeneous (culturally, politically, religiously, etc.) nor static. However, the historical generalizations made here serve as an orienting precursor to the ethnographic materials considered in the second and third chapters of this thesis. Several important periods in Japanese-American history will be discussed from the perspective of Bon Odori practice at the Seattle Buddhist Church. I will consider the general historical context, the response of _Jōdo Shinshū_ leaders to that context, and what role Bon Odori festivals played in the Japanese American Buddhist experience during the time.

Along the way, readers will meet three women who have taken up the mantle of artistic leadership in Bon Odori over the course of its nearly century-long history in the Pacific Northwest: Fukuko Nakatani, Kikue “Kiki” Hagimori, and Gwen Kawabata Florence. These three figures have crafted Bon Odori in Seattle as an opportunity to dance with history – a history in which expressive culture is political, creative possibility
is found even in constraint, tradition is constructed and dance is done in strategic spaces (from Main Street in Nihonmachi to a dusty lot in the Minidoka incarceration camp) to cohere a community of the present.¹

_Early immigrants and the spread of Jōdo Shinshū to the United States_

Japanese immigrants began to arrive in the United States (and what would become the United States) in the later part of the 19th century to work as agricultural laborers. There were two distinct waves of these majority-Buddhist immigrants, the first settling in Hawaii beginning in 1868, and the second on the mainland United States a year later (forming the Wakamatsu Colony in Gold Hill, California).² The Chinese Exclusion Act (enforced 1882-1892) resulted in an increased need for Japanese workers due to labor shortage, and following the incorporation of Hawaii as a U.S. territory in 1898, immigrant laborers could travel freely between Hawaii and the mainland. As Japanese communities spread throughout the West Coast, so did anti-Japanese sentiment. Fears of the “yellow peril” were stirred by “agitators in the early 1900s [who cast] the ‘threat’ of Japanese immigration as a precursor to a Japanese invasion” (Denshō). The early decades of the 20th century were also marked by attempts at school segregation (1893, 1906); immigration bans denying Japanese workers entry to the mainland United States from Hawaii, Mexico, or Canada (1907) and from Japan (the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” of 1908); and denials of land ownership rights (California’s Alien Land Law of 1913 as precedent) and naturalized citizenship (Supreme Court decision in Takeo

¹ For a detailed history of the Seattle Buddhist Church, see Ronald Magden’s _Mukashi, Mukashi, Long Long Ago_ (2008), which draws on the temple archive and oral histories to synthesize the most complete picture yet available of the first hundred years of this community’s life.
² For a chronology of important events in Japanese-American history, I am drawing from the comprehensive timeline compiled by Ng (2002, xvii-xxvi).
Ozawa v. U.S., 1922) to migrants. The Immigration Act of 1924 (National Origins Act) also affected the community in that it prevented further immigration from Japan.

Given the anti-Japanese sociopolitical environment in early 20th century America, it is not surprising that local efforts at building and sustaining a sense of Japanese-American community were important. Though not all migrants and their families were Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists, a great number were, and in these communities religion became a centripetal force in uncertain times. Both in Hawaii and on the mainland, Jōdo Shinshū religious communities formed first and then later received official recognition by branch headquarters in Japan and the arrival of clergy to lead, organize, and legitimize these groups.3 In his comprehensive history of the spread of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism to North America (bukkyō tōzen, or “Buddhism moving eastward”), Ama describes how religious practice was modified depending on local context (2011, 6). Jōdo Shinshū manifested differently in Hawaii and on the West Coast of the United States, for example, and there were a host of locally dependent tensions (economic, political, social, and religious) that faith community leaders had to help their congregations negotiate in tactical ways. The acculturative forces of “Japanization” and “Americanization” (see Ama 2001, p. 5 and 107) required the balancing of modern Jōdo Shinshū teaching and practice as funded and

3 There are several denominations of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, the largest of which are the two branches of the Honganji-ha denomination. These are the Nishi (west) and Higashi (east) orders. Though the Higashi order (as well as other Buddhist sects, including Jōdoshū, Nichiren, and Sōtō) had a presence in Hawaii and on the mainland, it was the Nishi Honganji that “largely overshadowed the overseas propagation” of Jōdo Shinshū (Ama 2011, 8). Communities of laborers on the mainland first requested official support from the Kyōto Nishi Honganji in the late 19th century. Once recognized, these sites in North America became an important component of a Jōdo Shinshū project of global reach. By the early 20th century, the sect had three “religious frontiers,” namely, Japan, East Asia, and North America (Hawaii, the mainland United States, and Canada) (Ama 2011, 189).
propagated by the Kyōto headquarters with the needs of immigrants and their families in the new sociopolitical environment of the United States.

In organizing congregations in their respective jurisdictions, the Honpa Honganji Mission of Hawaii (HHMH) and the Buddhist Mission of North America (BMNA) took two different approaches to propagating Buddhist teachings. As Ama (2011) argues, the former adopted a “sectarian” stance and the latter a “universalist” one (31). In Hawaii, clergy promoted the sect-specific teachings of Jōdo Shinshū in their ministry to sugarcane plantation workers. On the mainland, however, religious leaders balanced their efforts tending to immigrants needs with their desire to make Buddhism appealing (or at least acceptable) to a white American audience. A universalist approach – that is, one emphasizing the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha universal to all Buddhist sects while deemphasizing the specifics of Jōdo Shinshū doctrine – served them in good stead, and even led to the conversion and ordination of some European Americans. The encounter with Protestantism (in conjunction with modernization of Jōdo Shinshū ritual in Japan) also led to changes in practice, especially in the BMNA.

Trying to reconcile American ties (both local and national) and ties to Japan became an important balancing act. Economic issues included the flow of funds and ministers from the Japanese headquarters to North American congregations, Issei remittances to Japan, and the effects of the Great Depression in the United States. The politics of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism in the United States were imbricated in the general anti-Asian public sentiment. Local and state laws were often discouraging of the formal establishment of Buddhist congregations. On the mainland, many Jōdo Shinshū organizations first registered themselves as nonreligious organizations as a way to bypass
these restrictions. Public tension was exacerbated by the fact that some Jōdo Shinshū clergy included imperial ideologies in their outreach (through ritual practices, through celebrating imperial holidays, and through Japanese language schools). As anti-Japanese attitudes increased, many community leaders made a tactical shift, emphasizing American presidential speeches and the nation’s founding documents rather than imperial dictates (Ama 2011). In the BMNA, leaders also emphasized outreach toward Americans interested in Buddhism by adopting the previously mentioned universalist approach. Finally, changes in practice (including a simplified service offered in both English and Japanese, Sunday services, hymns in both languages, Anglicized wedding rituals, and changes in clerical dress) and in terminology (including “church,” “mission,” “minister,” “reverend,” and “sermon”) responded to the requests of congregants and also fit in with Protestant norms that the general American public could more readily understand (Ama 2011, 87-109).

In spite of the challenges in negotiating the relationship between American temples and Japanese headquarters, and in spite of anti-Japanese sentiment, Jōdo Shinshū enjoyed a rapid and wide spread in North America in the early decades of the 20th century. It had become the primary form of ethnic Japanese Buddhism in North America by World War II (Ama 2011, 3).

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4 The Seattle Buddhist Church was first registered with the state of Washington as a real estate company and received its corporate charter on January 27, 1906. According to the Washington State Constitution, land could not be owned by non-citizens, so then-head-minister Gendō Nakai had two white American citizens and temple members (Selma Anderson and Charles Rowland) file the application with him (Ama 2011, 41).
(Jōdo Shinshū) Issei in Seattle and Bon Odori before World War II

Japanese immigrants arrived in the major port city of Seattle directly or via Canada, Oregon, California, or Hawaii. Seattle became “the main settlement area for the Japanese in the Northwest,” with a Nihonmachi (Japantown) soon forming in the area spanned by “lower Main Street, from Second Avenue eastward, and Washington, Jackson, King and Weller Streets from Fifth Avenue eastward” (Chin 2009, 29-30). As more Issei arrived, various institutions were established to support a growing community in social, political, cultural, artistic, and religious ways. Given the diverse provenance of these early immigrants, kenjinkai (or prefectural associations) such as the large Hiroshima Ken and the societies for Okayama and Yamaguchi prefectures took on particular importance for mutual aid and social support (30). A Japanese language school was founded, and there were opportunities for training in dance, music, martial arts, and decorative arts. The immigrant community’s religious landscape included several Buddhist and Christian denominations. Once established, the Seattle Jōdo Shinshū community (then the Seattle Bukkyokai) was the largest of the Buddhist denominations in the city.

In February of 1901, nine young men (one of whom, Reverend Shodo Hatano, was a Jōdo Shinshū minister sent as an informal scout to live and work in Seattle) organized to formally request that the Nishi Honganji assign a permanent minister to Seattle. Along with the 48 other local Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists who signed the request, they hoped to make Seattle “the fourth mission established in America and the first outside California” (Magden 2008, 12). In November, Reverend Kakuryo Nishijima arrived from San Francisco, where he had been serving, to arrange a Young Men’s
Buddhist Association (YMBA) branch in Seattle. The Seattle YMBA began meetings the following month, and in February 1902 the group secured a building at 624 South Main Street for Sangha activities. Finally, on June 18, 1902, the kaikyoshi (overseas minister) promised by the Nishi Honganji arrived in Seattle. From the very first day, Seattle Buddhist Church’s first permanent minister, Reverend Gendo Nakai, remained “intensely active spiritually…[and] carried out [his duties] with joy and enthusiasm” (Magden 2008, 18). When they received word in May 1902 that Nakai was on his way to Seattle, YMBA members reacted with the same enthusiasm, “danc[ing] for joy” together at their weekly meeting, according to Magden (15).

How Bon Odori was manifest in Seattle between 1902 and 1932 remains unclear. Certainly Obon was observed, with temple and cemetery memorial services, and certainly Issei knew min’yō and folk dances from their respective prefectures. As previously mentioned, Bon Odori festivals were banned in Japan in the late Meiji Period (1867-1912). How the ban translated into the lived experience of Issei immigrants, however, is unclear. Since dances to regional min’yō made up the repertoire of Bon Odori dancing at this point, perhaps some elements of practice were retained in the folk repertoire even though the large festival gathering was not permitted. Akiyama’s (1989) Nisei interlocutors (who she admits are not a representative sample) did not remember Bon Odori being held in the mainland United States prior to the 1930s. Akiyama cites Kodani’s description of Bon Odori practice in this period as sporadic but not annual, mentioning that some Issei recalled Bon Odori performance in Los Angeles from these

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5 The Seattle Buddhist Church has had three locations over the course of its history. In 1908, a new temple was built on a plot purchased at 1020 South Main Street. Right before World War II, the Sangha moved to its current location at 1427 South Main Street.
early years (114-15). Kazuo Itō’s seminal work on *Issei* history (1973), which draws from oral historical narratives, covers the Seattle immigrant community extensively. The story of the early days of Bon Odori in Seattle, is told almost entirely by Itō’s *Issei* and *Nisei* interlocutors (see pp. 805-809). Based on the dances (e.g. “Tōkyō Ondo”), locations of dancing (a planned route moving through the streets of *Nihonmachi*), and types of involvement (e.g. of Seattle classical dance studios and of large audiences including white spectators) referenced in these testimonies, Itō’s interlocutors are remembering the large, formally-organized festivals that began in 1932 rather than ones occurring earlier (as early as 1900, according to one interviewee).

August 15, 1932 represented a major moment in Bon Odori practice in Seattle. The success of this organized, large-scale, and public event was largely due to the efforts of two individuals: Fukuko Nakatani and Reverend Yoshio Iwanaga. Iwanaga established Bon Odori in the United States as a distinctly Japanese-American religio-cultural practice, and Nakatani, one of Seattle’s most respected classical dance masters, made Iwanaga’s vision a popular reality on Main Street.

Iwanaga (1900-1950), a Buddhist missionary and dance teacher, arrived in the United States in 1930 (for a comprehensive examination of Iwanaga’s life and work, see Akiyama 1989). Born in Kumamoto prefecture, Iwanaga’s early direction was toward a career in business, though a period of illness, self-education, and reflection caused him to reevaluate this life path. As Akiyama writes, Iwanaga’s involvement in dance began in the 1920s and paralleled his reconversion to Buddhism [after a brief period of conversion to Christianity. From that [point on] his commitment to his religion and his commitment to enhancing the lives of young people through dance were closely connected and it was this connection that gave continuity and direction to his work. (12)
Before he moved to the United States, Iwanaga taught folk dances to min'yō and doyo (children’s songs) to young women working in Japanese factories, often choosing music that was recently composed (in the Taisho Period, 1912-1926) to appeal to the young adults. The ban on Bon Odori was lifted during this period, and Iwanaga carried its resurgence with him to the United States. As mentioned earlier, Bon Odori was not particularly affiliated with Jōdo Shinshū temples in Japan, but Iwanaga created an affiliation between festival and faith in Amida Buddha’s vow in American Jōdo Shinshū practice. Beginning in California, Iwanaga worked his way along the Pacific Coast (including visits to Seattle, Tacoma, and Auburn) teaching doyo buyo and bon odori dancing at 20 temples over two decades (Akiyama 1989, x). Iwanaga knew that fostering a “distinctly Japanese American Buddhist identity” would require outreach to the Nisei generation in addition to appealing to Issei community leaders (Masatsugu 2004, 79). Expressive culture (music and dance) and festival were ways to involve the younger generation that were perhaps more appealing that Obon’s solemn memorial services.

Iwanaga’s work simultaneously established a sectarian (Jōdo Shinshū) framing of the Bon Odori festival and contributed to its becoming a general ethnic and cultural signifier as an event also open to non-Buddhists. As Akiyama explains,

Reverend Iwanaga, along with those who helped him plan Obon Festivals[,] shaped the event in such a way that it sent a clear message, “This is a Buddhist celebration.” They did so by having the Buddhist ministers lead the procession of dancers into the dance circle, followed by the recitation of the Nembutsu. They then began the dancing with a bon dance choreographed by Reverend Iwanaga to

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6 After the war, Reverend Iwanaga returned to his home in Watsonville, California where he “continued to teach Bon Odori, and, with his wife, headed the BCA Music and Recording Department” (Akiyama 1989, 11).

7 “Nama Amida Butsu,” or “I take refuge in Amida Buddha.” This recitation – the core of Jōdo Shinshū practice – demonstrates gratitude for and trust in Amida Buddha’s vow promising Enlightenment for all beings.
the modern religious music of “Obon Ondo.” By finishing the dance event in the same way, Reverend Iwanaga provided a religious frame which surrounded the dance. […] The distinction between Obon as a Buddhist religious practice and Obon as an expression of Japanese culture did not seem an issue to those who participated in bon odori during the 1930s, including Reverend Iwanaga. […] The symbols presented in music, costume, dance and the dancers themselves spoke to people of Japanese heritage, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. They spoke of Buddhist ideals and they spoke of the beauty of Japan. This religious celebration was also an affirmative statement of being of Japanese heritage. (135-37)

These themes have continued in American Bon Odori practice today, as chapter 3 will discuss further in the case of Seattle Buddhist Church’s festival.

When Iwanaga arrived in Seattle in the summer of 1932, he collaborated with temple member and nihon buyo teacher Fukuko Nakatani (1888-1969) to establish Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church. A consummate artist, Nakatani received a high level of training from a young age. Osho-san, as her students called her, trained in Japan and received her natori (professional name) in the Yamamura School of nihon buyo and in shamisen before coming to the United States in 1915.8 She also sang and played tzusumi (a small hand drum). In Seattle, Nakatani formed a classical dance school, the Hatsune-kai, in which she instructed several generations of students prior to, during, and after World War II.9 Both children and adults would travel from the surrounding region to study with Nakatani, who held regular recitals and staged performances (including kabuki) in the Nippon Kan. The Nippon Kan was a theater and gathering place for the Japanese-American community before the war. Excluded from Seattle theaters (except for balcony seats), the Issei built their own space in Nihonmachi in 1909 (Burke & Burke

8 Osho-san is a shortened form of oshisyō-sama (the word shisyō with honorifics), which in this context is a respectful reference to a dance master or instructor. Different from sensei, Osho-san acknowledges a high degree of skill in artistry and the ability to teach that art to others. Thank you to Yuko Kuwai of The Ohio State University for her assistance with this term.
9 There were at least two other dance schools in Seattle before the war: the Matsuba-kai (starting in 1911) and the Mimasu-kai (Itō 1973, 815).
2011, 27). As a “focal point” for the community, the Nippon Kan housed Japanese and American theater and music (including kabuki, Noh, opera, and orchestral and solo performance), debates, political and club meetings, religious services, martial arts practices and demonstrations, shibai entertainments (plays), and of course, nihon buyo performances (31). According to Nippon Kan historians and restorers Edmund and Elizabeth Burke, “the name Hatsune Kai was boldly painted on the stage wall of the Nippon Kan,” a reminder that Nakatani “was a major force in retaining the cultural arts traditions brought from Japan” (39). Members of Nakatani’s last Hatsune-kai cohort have leadership roles in Bon Odori today. They remember her as a strict teacher, caring about the details of traditional practice and transmitting that sense of artistic responsibility to her students through “a good discipline,” in the words of Nakatani’s granddaughter, Seiko (Wanda) Miyahara.

Nakatani’s high level of training and membership in the Seattle Buddhist Church Sangha made her the obvious choice for Iwanaga’s collaboration. Nakatani identified herself as a classical practitioner, and thus assumed the role of organizing the dance component of Bon Odori (including selecting pieces and choreography) and teaching the teachers who would lead the public in the dances. According to her granddaughter Seiko, Nakatani did not participate in the actual festival dancing, at least not after the war. She did shape an event, however, that became immensely popular.

Iwanaga brought his dance repertoire to Seattle during his travels in 1932, sharing these simple, “morally decent,” and easily learned pieces with Nakatani. As in the other Bon Odori festivals Iwanaga organized, these were pieces drawn from regional repertoires from throughout Japan. Thus they resonated with the prefecturally diverse
Issei rather than exclusively focusing on the folk style of a single region (as it would be done in Japanese Bon Odori practice; see Akiyama 1989, 118). Nakatani taught the dances to six leaders: Corky and Yuri Kawasaki, Masaru Harada, Hatsumi Tachiyama, Yudai Arakawa, and Ayako Shinoda (Magden 2008, 74). On August 15, their preparations resulted in a successful Bon Odori:

[L]anterns gave off enough light for 2,000 Japanese and Caucasians to see the six dancers start of with Kikunonaka (Within the Chrysanthemum). The sextet performed in a roped-off, packed dirt area in front of the church. From the small, rickety platform in the center of the street, records were amplified by a very primitive loudspeaker system. After the Kikunonaka ended, 200 women wearing kimonos and men dressed in Old Japan costumes and wigs performed 13 dances. In the beginning, the dancers formed a large oblong circle bowing toward each other in Gassho, a gesture of reverence. After formally bowing to each other several times, the dancers performed the popular Goshu Ondo followed by Tokyo Ondo and Itaro Bayashi (The Dance of the Itinerant Gambler). Everyone, young and old alike, who had been cooking or serving food came out for the last dance, Goshu Ondo. Hatsumi Harada remembers “great exuberance” until the women discovered mud caked on the bottom of their kimonos. (Magden 2008, 74-75)

Festival the following year (1933) featured live music provided by shamisen and fue (Magden 2008, 75), but recordings from Japan were also making their way into circulation. The new ondo musical style – featuring a vocal soloist with a chorus responding over accompaniment provided by orchestra (including string and brass sections, upbeat percussion, and sometimes including shamisen and taiko) – was gaining great popularity in Japan. Records were produced with diagrams for dancing on the album sleeve, and after visiting Japan in 1933 and 1935, Iwanaga brought back some of these with him (Akiyama 1989, 119). Hits like “Tōkyō Ondo” (1934’s big dance craze, according to Kodani 1999), made their way to the United States where temples incorporated them into their Bon Odori practice. Of course, neither Iwanaga nor Nakatani needed to rely on a diagrammed dance given their experience. Both individuals
choreographed new dances to new or existing music if they desired, modified dances both in terms of aesthetic preference and to enable participation by untrained dancers, and selected or composed dances that would be locally meaningful (e.g. Nakatani’s choreography of the “Sōran Bushi” fisherman’s dance, or her inclusion of a dance from Hiroshima where many Seattlesites had family connections).

The Seattle Buddhist Church Sangha comprised 482 Issei, 588 Nisei, and 18 white members (hakujin) in early 1936, yet it hosted festivals that drew thousands in the mid-1930s (Magden 2008, 85). The increasingly large crowds for Bon Odori included non-Buddhist Japanese Americans from Seattle, as well as individuals and families (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist) traveling to the city from throughout the Pacific Northwest region specifically for the event. In addition, by 1935 Bon Odori had been moved to 6th Avenue and Main Street, closer to downtown and coinciding with Seattle’s Golden Potlatch.10 Bon Odori dancers and musicians became a part of this major tourist event and white tourists themselves became part of Bon Odori, even joining in the dancing according to Magden (2008, 75).

In these years of Bon Odori’s flourishing, it was one of Nihonmachi’s largest events of the year – an opportunity not only for members of the Seattle Buddhist Church community to gather and express a uniquely American Jōdo Shinshū identity, but for Issei and Nisei to be brought together in a celebration of being of Japanese descent in

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10 Bon Odori’s location is included on the map of Seattle’s pre-war Nihonmachi Itō includes in his seminal Issei: A History of Japanese Immigrants in North America. The Hatsune-kai and the Nippon Kan are also there, each about a block away from the dance route (1973, vi-viii). Photographs from Bon Odori in the 1930s are accessible through the Denshō archive. Many photos of Bon Odori in Seattle throughout the event’s history are reprinted in Magden 2008, including those from the 1962 World’s Fair. The Seattle Times’ digital archive also includes press photography coverage of Bon Odori spanning from the festival’s beginnings to the present.

31
America. Pre-war Bon Odori in Seattle was somewhat of an “invented tradition, or at least re-invented tradition,” as Johnson (2008, 210) has argued in the case of Okinawan Eisā dance in Bon Odori festivals (after Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, and Schechner and Turner 1985). In its Japanese-American manifestation with a Jōdo Shinshū frame and a dance repertoire that simultaneously reflected the diversity of Issei provenance and was locally appealing, Bon Odori in Seattle represented a new take on a Japanese tradition that itself was marked by complexity rather than easy coherence (see the introduction’s discussion of origins). But even as a newly-established tradition in Seattle, Bon Odori nevertheless had strong affective resonance with its participants – as reaching toward a diasporic past (closer to the Issei experience than the Nisei experience), as honoring the lives of lost loved ones, and as celebrating the strength of a now-established Japanese-American community in Seattle in spite of early years of discrimination and struggle.

The war years and Incarceration


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11 When describing the treatment of Japanese Americans in the United States during World War II, I will follow Denshō’s terminological recommendations. Arguing that “language matter[s],” Denshō does away with the “euphemisms” used by the federal government and the U.S. military. Specifically, “evacuation” is rejected because it “implies the forced move was done as a precaution for Japanese Americans’ own safety.” “Exclusion” and “mass removal” are preferred, as they capture the compulsory, punitive, and discriminatory nature of the move. In addition, “incarceration” is used instead of “internment” (which “refers to the legally permissible detention of enemy aliens in time of war [and is thus] problematic when applied to American citizens”). Incarceration occurred at “incarceration camps” (or “concentration camps” or “prison camps”), not “assembly centers” or “relocation centers” as the WRA called them. For more on the politics of the language surrounding Japanese American incarceration, see Daniels 2000. Denshō also refers to both Issei and Nisei as “Japanese Americans” since the Issei lack of American citizenship was due to legal prohibition rather than a lack of desire. Immigration law was not changed to allow the Issei to become naturalized citizens until 1952.
stigmatized” as “non-Christians” and “enemy Japs” (10), Japanese-American Buddhists struggled to “make Buddhism palatable to the American public while retaining many of those aspects that had become central to ethnic identity” (1). BMNA leaders took immediate strategic action after Pearl Harbor, which included a plan to transfer leadership from *Issei* Buddhist priests and leaders (non-citizens who were “considered high-risk candidates for espionage”) to Nisei citizens (20). This served several purposes, including placing control and property ownership in the hands of U.S. citizens and bolstering efforts to make Buddhism seem less foreign and therefore less dangerous to the general public.

Beginning in January 1942, BMNA leaders, including the Reverend Kenryo Kumata, quickly made plans for “an emergency ‘Americanization of Buddhism’ program” with the goal of “inclu[d]ing Buddhism as a part of the American national imaginary” (Masatsugu 2004, 31-38). To achieve this aim, leaders emphasized BMNA alignment with Anglo-Protestant norms of religious practice (hymns, Sunday services, English-language services) and terminology (“churches,” “ministers”); placed a premium on demonstrations of loyalty and patriotism (supporting American Red Cross, War Bonds); and strategically stressed Buddhist universalism rather than a sectarian differences (38-41). A temporary name change from the Buddhist Mission of North America (BMNA) to the “Buddhist Churches of America” (BCA) in February 1942 became permanent the following year (43). Kumata’s emergency Nisei Buddhist National Conference in May 1943 also “included a provision explicitly severing all ties between BCA and the nation of Japan,” placing all leadership responsibilities in the hands of American citizens (54).
President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 of February 19, 1942 authorized the forced removal of those considered a threat to the nation from War Department-designated military areas, or exclusion zones. Because of the conflation of race with perceived threat to the nation, the BMNA’s plan to have a smooth transfer of responsibility to Nisei in order to mitigate the loss of Issei leadership was thwarted by the mass removal of all people of Japanese ancestry, American citizens included. In spite of everything, “Buddhist leaders [of the BCA] sought to calm its membership, urging Buddhist to cooperate with government plans and to prepare for evacuation ‘in a quiet and orderly manner’” (Masatsugu 2004, 49, quoting Kumata’s address to the BCA on March 4, 1942). Forced relocation meant the disruption and diffusion of Buddhist communities as minsters, leaders, and community members were sent to incarceration camps across the country. 120,000 people of Japanese descent – two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens – were incarcerated over the course of the war (Denshō).

On October 4, 1941, Seattle Buddhist Church, under the leadership of head minister Reverend Tatsuya Ichikawa, had dedicated a new temple complex built at 1427 South Main Street. The pendulum swing between this major celebration of a milestone in community life and the events a few months later could not have been more extreme (see Magden 2008, 111-120). Magden describes the morning of December 7, 1941 at Seattle Buddhist Church as follows:

As Japanese warplanes swirled over Oahu, Hawaii…services and Dharma School classes were ending. At noon, the Ichikawas hosted a party for the Dharma School teachers. Someone entered hurriedly and told the gathering that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. Stunned, the teachers left silently. Elsewhere in Nihonmachi self-appointed heralds went up and down Jackson, Main, and Washington streets yelling [the news] in that never-to-be-forgotten moment… (116)
Arrests of “dangerous” Issei, including leaders in the Seattle Buddhist Church community, began that afternoon. On December 23, the temple hosted “the largest political assemblage in Nihonmachi’s history,” an Americanism Rally organized by temple leaders and the local JACL (Japanese American Citizens’ League) in which 1,100 of the 1,500 in attendance signed a resolution sent to President Roosevelt pledging allegiance, loyalty, and service to U.S. efforts in “a war forced upon us by Japan” (Magden 2008, 120).

In spite of Nisei temple community leader Takeo Nogaki’s argument at this event that “citizenship and loyalty are not matters of skin,” the following months saw waves of removal of Japanese Americans from the community. As members of the Seattle Buddhist Church were forcibly removed from the new space they had created for themselves, the military moved in, posting notice the temple was property of the U.S. Government in February 1942 and occupying it in May. The temple complex was used as the U.S. Maritime Commission Office from May 3, 1942 to August 4, 1946. Reverend Ichikawa was taken into custody on April 26 immediately after he finished performing a wedding, to be sent to various Department of Justice camps along with other Buddhist ministers and particularly “dangerous” Issei (Magden 2008, 128). Reverend Eiyu Terao provided support between Ichikawa’s removal and the closing of the temple, before ultimately being sent to join the approximately 1,400 Seattle Buddhist Church members at Camp Harmony (128).

Japanese Americans in Seattle and the surrounding region were removed to concentration camps, via this temporary “assembly center” in Puyallup where they spent
several months. Reflecting on life in barracks and animal stalls with no running water,

William Hosokawa describes the “assembly center” as follows:

We were evacuated to a WCCA [Wartime Civilian Control Agency] camp which
was at the fairgrounds in Puyallup, Washington – euphemistically named Camp
Harmony, where there was very little harmony. In fact, it was a miserable place
[and] the Puyallup fairgrounds were not large enough to accommodate the seven
thousand people from Seattle [and Tacoma]. (Tateishi 1984, 19)

Camp Harmony was open from April 28 to September 12, 1942.  

After a summer in Puyallup, most of Camp Harmony’s residents were transferred
either to Minidoka (an incarceration camp in southern Idaho) or Tule Lake (an
incarceration camp in northern California) (Denshō). Many Seattle Buddhist Church
members, including Reverend Ichikawa’s wife and children as well as Fukuko Nakatani,
were assigned to Minidoka, which was open from August 10, 1942 to October 28, 1945.
Given the turmoil and uncertainty of two relocations in the span of a few months and the
timing of the camp’s opening, it does not seem likely (nor is it documented anywhere)
that there were large public Bon Odori celebrations at Camp Harmony or in Minidoka in
the summer of 1942. Indeed, the Jōdo Shinshū community in Minidoka did not begin to
regroup until late summer. Upon his arrival on August 30th (after Obon season), Reverend
Terao from Seattle Buddhist Church was the only Buddhist minister at Minidoka, since
Reverend Ichikawa had been separated from the Sangha and sent to a Department of
Justice camp (Magden 2008, 140). With the help of community leader Masaru Harada,
Terao set out to draw together a Sangha, beginning with a census of incarcerated Jōdo

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12 For more on Camp Harmony, see Fiset 2009.
13 The Minidoka Interlude (Takeuchi 1990) lists a 4th of July celebration “with ondos” (here meaning folk
dances) and a social dance for university-age students as occurring at Camp Harmony in the summer of
1942, but there is no mention of a Bon Odori festival. There was, however, a “Bon Festival” held in the
Portland, Oregon Assembly Center in mid-July of that year, supporting the claim of Akiyama (1989) and
Tuck (1987) that Bon Odori festivals were held in some “assembly centers.”
Shinshū Buddhists (including those from Seattle Buddhist Church) spread throughout Minidoka’s 44 blocks. Terao and Harada’s efforts at cohesion must have been successful quickly. According to the camp newspaper, the Minidoka Irrigator, plans for a “community-wide ‘Bon Odori’” for the following summer were already being made by mid-October of 1942.

A Bon Odori in Minidoka did take place in August 1943, but this fact has to do with conditions beyond the efforts of Harada and Terao to reformulate a Jōdo Shinshū community in camp. Music, dance, and other recreational activities (from sports to crafts) were encouraged by the War Relocation Authority (WRA), and this encouragement (or at least, permission) extended, paradoxically, to Japanese artistic forms. Waseda (2005; 2013) and Kurashige (2012) have explored reasons why, each considering the relationship between Bon Odori and WRA policy as a case study in larger examinations of expressive cultural practices in camp.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor interrupted the flourishing of Japanese performing arts taking place in the 1930s, turning “anything Japanese…taboo” (Waseda 2005, 178). Thus it makes sense that part of WRA policy for camp activities included sponsoring lessons in Western classical music, ballroom dancing, and big band jazz ensembles (with salaried players) in a project of “Americanization” (197). In Minidoka, for example, young Nisei were involved in Drum & Bugle Corps (which had been popular pre-war among Seattle Buddhist Church youth), and internees of all ages were entertained by the Minidoka Matinee Orchestra and The Harmonaires swing band. For the WRA, permitting

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14 The survey found a total number of 5,168 Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists in Minidoka hailing from temples in Seattle, Portland, and throughout the Pacific Northwest region. The Seattle-specific data comprised “640 families in which at least one member practiced Jodo Shinshu [,] 129 Issei bachelors, 111 widows, and 132 Nisei young men and women living by themselves” (Magden 2008, 142-43).
and promoting music and dance fit in a greater project of social control, as these activities helped reduce the stress, frustration, and boredom that came with involuntary confinement. Thus, as Waseda argues, in the “extraordinary circumstances” of incarceration, some “exceptional opportunities” for artistic expression and creativity were fostered:

Musical activities were promoted in the camps because music was recognized as a social and cultural necessity by both the Japanese American internees and the camp authorities. For the internees, music was an important means for creating hope, cohesion, resistance, and a sense of identity; yet for the camp authorities, the same music was understood to be a mechanism by which resentment could be diffused and morale built. Basically, the authorities saw it as a means of preventing discord. Thus, music thrived in concentration camps, fulfilling multiple functions that were specifically demanded of it by the extreme circumstances. (172)

Interestingly, the “non-objectionable recreational activities” (179) encouraged by the WRA included traditional Japanese music and dance and by extension – since it was openly and elaborately practiced in camp – Bon Odori. According to Waseda, the musical genres performed in the camps include various types of Japanese plays (such as kabuki), naniwa-bushi (narrative music), gidayū (narrative music accompanied by the shamisen), biwa (narrative music accompanied by a lute-type instrument), classical dance, koto (zither), nagauta (vocal music accompanied by the shamisen), shakuhachi (bamboo flute), and yōkyoku (vocal music in Nō theater) (2013).

The concentration of those of Japanese ancestry led to the “vitalization and revitalization” of various traditional expressive cultural practices that comingled with contemporary American popular forms (Waseda 2005, 182). The best examples of such mixtures were the frequent and popular talent shows or revues called engei-kai. In Minidoka, one engei-kai program summarized in the September 16, 1944 Irrigator included “popular songs, music, odori [dancing], manzai [comedy] and tap numbers.”
Skilled practitioners of *koto*, *shakuhachi*, and *nihon buyo* were incarcerated along with other Japanese Americans, and beyond offering performances, many were employed as teachers of their craft. Instruments and costumes were often created from materials at hand to make do until real ones could be sent from friends outside camp. In several cases, Waseda reports that classical dance instructors received the second-highest salary of all camp workers: $19 a month, with medical doctors receiving $20 (2005, 182). It is unclear whether Nakatani, incarcerated at Minidoka along with her family and many of her students, received such a salary teaching dance. However, her WRA internee record lists her potential occupations in camp as 1) “Dancers and chorus girls,” and 2) “Musicians and teachers of music.” Nakatani’s artistic presence in camp is indicated by mentions of performances of her *Hatsune-kai* (along with two other dance schools, the *Mimasu-kai* and the *Yayoi-kai*) in the *Minidoka Irrigator* newspaper and photos in the *Minidoka Interlude* yearbook (Takeuchi 1990).

As in other camps, *ondo* dancing occurred at Minidoka outside as a social event or associated with a particular celebration outside of Bon Odori (e.g. the *ondo* dancing done at Camp Harmony for Independence Day in 1942). These occasions were important, as Waseda observes, “because internment generally intensified the generation gap between Issei and Nisei, by depriving the former of their leadership and power and by

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15 The September 16, 1944 *Minidoka Irrigator* article in which the *Hatsune-kai* is mentioned discusses a recreation and entertainment program for “the elderly folks,” or the Issei interested in such things. The three dance studios are described as offering at least monthly *shibai* performances. Minidoka’s newspaper, like periodicals in other camps, had a Japanese supplement to its English text. Some content overlapped between these sections, though not all. Given that the *Hatsune-kai*’s name appears without further elaboration in this 1944 article, it seems likely that Nakatani’s expertise was well-established and that the activities of a dance school led by such a prominent Issei would have been covered in more detail in the Japanese-language portion of the *Irrigator*. 
privileging the latter as American citizens[.] Ondo dancing in the camps [offered] occasions for, albeit temporary, cross-generational integration” (2005, 188).

The Community Activities division in Minidoka – responsible for many social, artistic, and athletic events in camp – convened a special Bon Odori planning committee months ahead of time. Though Nakatani’s involvement in Minidoka’s Bon Odori remains unclear, it is hard to imagine that her experience and leadership in Seattle’s large pre-war event would not have been put to use in organizing the festival and teaching its dances. On Saturday, August 14, 1943, the Irrigator proclaimed a “gala Bon Odori slated for Obon” the following week, inviting “the entire camp […] to participate in this traditional annual entertainment.” Satoru Ichikawa, then 13, remembers attending the celebration held “out in a vacant lot, a dusty lot.” There were in two evenings of festivities, with dancing taking place on the Block 32-34 field on Saturday, August 21 and on the Block 12 field on Sunday, August 22. In anticipation of this “gigantic” event the Irrigator published the following in an article on Saturday morning:

Camp clothes predominating, with a sprinkling of kimonos and original costumes, “Obon” will be commemorated by the traditional Bon Odori tonight and tomorrow evenings at 8. […] Approximately a thousand residents, young and old, are expected to participate in this annual event. Oiled up through constant practices in various recreation halls, some dancers will give ready competition to others, while more confident enthusiasts are betting on their ability to “catch on” on the field. Harmonious relations are expected to be promoted between the Issei and the Nisei in this one common institution. The Issei will be dancing in the traditional and fundamental steps, while some Nisei are expected to mix in some ball-room dancing and perhaps a little “jit” [Jitterbug], making the “bon odori” a thoroughly cosmopolitan affair.

According to the Interlude, about 2,000 of Minidoka’s nearly 10,000 residents participated during the weekend of the 1943 Bon Odori. As was the case back home in Seattle, Bon Odori was attended by both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. In camp, as
Waseda observed and the excerpt from the Irrigator demonstrates, participation in Bon Odori opportunity to perform one’s generational affiliation and Japanese-American identity. Bon Odori in camp was a mediated and live experience (there were both record players in camp and instruments available), just as it was pre-war in Seattle and would continue to be after the war. The “traditional and fundamental steps” of the Issei participants alongside the infusion of American popular dance by the Nisei participants made the evenings of Minidoka’s Bon Odori “something new yet familiar” in camp (Kodani 1999, 13). As post-event coverage in the Irrigator’s “Feminidadoka” column on Saturday, Aug. 28, 1943 highlighted, the festival was still a place to see and be seen, to experience the feeling of *communitas* (Turner 1982; 1987) engendered by the music and dance, and to enjoy a celebration that continued late into the night:

> [W]e admit that we, as many others, found the bon matsuri [the Bon Festival] a festive background for meeting and talking once again with seldom seen friends…and on the sideline making interesting studies of people in general. Many a Seattleite hearing the familiar odori music probably recalled 6th and Main, the incline in front of the Old Nichiren church, Lincoln Park, Jefferson Park…and the endless succession of ice cream, pop and watermelon downed at such occasions. Though slightly peeved when the music from the other side of camp kept us awake, this doesn’t keep us from congratulating the obon committee for putting over a success. This center has seen little enough of such campwide festivities and any persons lending their efforts to provide a little diversion need a well-deserved pat on the back.

The *Irrigator* correctly predicted that there would be no Bon Odori festival at Minidoka in 1944. Since there likely had not been one during Minidoka’s first summer, the 1943 festival became especially significant as a moment of community cohesion between forced evacuation and coerced dispersal toward the end of the war:

To many, the “odori” will mean probably the last time when everybody would get together and celebrate a festival. Next year will find most of the evacuees
scattered in the country through the relocation program. The festival will be just another thing to be remembered in reminiscences about relocation days.

Considering the politics of Bon Odori’s performance in Minidoka raises questions of agency versus social control in the form of WRA support (or at least tolerance). How political was the move to dance Bon Odori? Claiming a space in which to dance, even a dusty lot, and choosing to maintain a tradition in the face of hardship was a demonstration of agency, even if it was (provisionally) allowed by the WRA.16

Expressing gratitude for and remembering the past helped reframe the present moment as one that could be endured by recognizing the familial, religious, cultural, ethnic, and social ties that continued to exist. In their commentary on arts and crafts created by incarcerated Japanese Americans during the war, Hirasuna and Hinrichs (2005) reference the concept of *gaman*, which she defines as “enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity” (7). As they explain,

> the objects that the Issei and the Nisei…made in camp are a physical manifestation of the art of *gaman*. The things they made from scrap and found materials are testaments to their perseverance, their resourcefulness, their spirit and humanity. […] Without [an] understanding [of the context of these pieces], what one sees are lovely objects, folk art, Americana with a Japanese twist. But all these lovely objects were made by prisoners in concentration camps,

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16 For additional analysis of the WRA’s “cultural pluralism,” see Alinder 2012, Kurashige 2012, Waseda 2005, and Waseda 2013. Alinder (2012) explores the politics of performance and photography of Bon Odori in camp, using the contrast between incarcerated Japanese American Bill Takeo Manbo and WRA photographer Joe McClelland’s Bon Odori photos from Heart Mountain and Granada, respectively, as a case study. Kurashige (2012) sees the WRA as ultimately “anti-racist,” arguing that scholars of Japanese American incarceration should appreciate “the widely diverse colors of internee experience [as documented in vernacular photography] that stem from the WRA’s ambivalent role as internees’ protector and jailer. Placing the agency’s shades of gray at the center of analysis is important [in] open[ing] up a new chapter in the study of the internment by expanding the current focus on internee misery and WRA coercion” (114). Waseda (2005; 2013) has explored these shades of gray with regard to music and dance forms as sanctioned expressive cultural practices. She notes that Japanese Americans in Hawaii (who were not incarcerated during the war) suppressed Japanese expressive culture rather than (re)vitalizing it in a “desperate effort toward Americanization” (2005, 196). In only one instance (at Tule Lake) was Japanese expressive culture mobilized for protest in “ultra-nationalism” (2005, 193).
surrounded by barbed wire fences, guarded by soldiers in watchtowers, with guns pointing down at them. (7)

Expressive cultural performance, especially in Bon Odori, represented an intangible expression of *gaman* for Seattleites incarcerated at Minidoka during the war.

*Interlude*

Post-war Asian-American politics and Japanese Americans’ role in them are too complex to fully elaborate here. There were differing attitudes about post-war integration, the status of Japanese Americans with relation to other minority groups (“model minority” status vis-à-vis the Civil Rights Movement), and generational differences in experience and understanding (between *Issei, Nisei, and the rising Sansei, or third generation*). Masatsugu (2004) and Kurashige (2002) have provided models for close reading of public celebration as sites of the performance and negotiation of these and other post-war issues. 17 Masatsugu writes about the 1948 Buddhist Golden Jubilee in San Francisco and Kurashige about the post-war history of Los Angeles’ Nisei Week through the 1990s.

Masatsugu (2004) identifies an important shift occurring after World War II, namely, a new attempt to decouple deterministic notions of race from religious and cultural practices in an effort to construct a postwar Japanese-American identity (see chapter 3). After the 1940s, community self-representations emphasized “Nisei as ethnic Americans whose loyalty to the nation was the byproduct of parental and community upbringing and individual decisions rather than racial inevitability” (62). Masatsugu

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17 A similar argument has been made in the case of American *taiko* practice beginning in the 1960s. See, for example, Ahlgren 2011. For a discussion of Bon Odori in post-war Hawaii and how it differed from the situation on the mainland, see Yano 1985.
pinpoints festival – including Bon Odori – as post-war opportunities to perform identity through the strategic use of “figures and symbols that underscored and reinforced ethno-religious bonds among Japanese American Buddhists and that made claims toward inclusion as Americans” (57).

Masatsugu focuses on the 1948 Buddhist Golden Jubilee festival as a key moment in launching these postwar identity negotiations. A ten-day festival in honor of the 50th anniversary of the BMNA, this event was the “first major public celebration staged by Buddhist Japanese Americans since the onset of WWII” (2004, 68). As Masatsugu characterizes it, the festival had two aims: to recognize and solidify Nisei leadership in the public eye, and to “engage the new discourse of race and race relations” that included Japanese Americans in the fabric of American life through education and “goodwill demonstration” (68-70). A Bon Odori dance in front of the San Francisco City Hall was effective in “ma[king] a symbolic claim to civic inclusion while using feminine representations of Buddhism and Japanese American ethnicity [– embodied in the graceful figure of the Bon Odori dancer –] to soften that claim” (80).18 These efforts were successful in gaining mainstream media coverage, though that coverage entailed a framing that emphasized assimilation and a non-threatening exoticism that would appeal to a white middle-class American majority (85).

The 1948 Buddhist Golden Jubilee was important as a formative site for “strategies of representation” that Japanese American Buddhist leaders “continued to draw from…in later civil rights campaigns” and assimilative efforts (Masatsugu 2004, 18). Masatsugu names three other characters important in the new postwar self-representational strategy of the Japanese American community – the Issei Buddhist pioneer, the Nisei war veteran, and the Nisei beauty queen – all of whom help in different ways in the “claim for civic inclusion” (2004, 72-80).
As the United States entered the Cold War period and sought Japan as an ally, Japanese and Japanese Americans became “represented in a gendered relationship to the United States as a potentially redeemable culture and people so long as they were not tempted by the lure of communism” (172). Thus, over the course of the second half of the 20th century, the view of Japanese Americans in the American popular consciousness shifted from “‘enemy race,’ to ‘ethnic Americans’ and ‘Cold War partners’” (10), to “model minority” (Daniels 1988, 283).

The post-war strategies of representation Masatsugu explores were not uniformly adopted by Japanese Americans, as Kurashige’s nuanced study of the politics surrounding and internal to Nisei Week makes clear. And with the national upheaval and calls for a radical rethinking of race in the United States in the late 1960s, divisions (falling mainly along generational lines) grew about what it should mean to be Japanese American and what activist imperatives that identity may or may not entail. Some young Nisei and Sansei, for example, countered integration strategies with a “new, radical version of [Issei] cosmopolitanism” that at first threatened the (imagined) coherence of a single Japanese America (see Kurashige 2002, 10-11 and 151-185). The version of cosmopolitanism embraced by their parents and grandparents, with its ideal of strategic assimilation into “white America,” was rejected by a younger generation in favor of a cosmopolitanism that “championed the progressive spirit of the group’s indigenous heritage and culture and historical connections to other racialized minorities and Third World peoples” (153). These were cosmopolitan activists, citizens of a messy world in which, they believed, minority voices should be heard and difference should not warrant a denial of civil rights.
The Nisei Week festival, however, wrote a “glossy” narrative onto this complexity, as Kurashige explains:

[T]he festival would not embrace the movement’s new cosmopolitanism until this identity itself was rearticulated. Although the line between the integrationist orthodoxy and the option of student radicalism was clear at the outset of the Asian American movement, this distinction became blurred and permeable as Nisei Week leaders, and Japanese Americans as a whole, joined the ethnic revival, echoing the activists’ call for ethnic pride and cultural retention. In so doing, Nisei Week transformed radical cosmopolitanism into the fuzzy, reformist, and even patriotic orthodoxy of cultural pluralism. (153)

In spite of – or in fact, because of – dominant narratives of (self)representation, Kurashige’s model of analysis challenges historians and ethnographers to look for the “micropolitics” involved in festival performance (214). In the Japanese-American case, he argues, an image of [a single community] as a phoenix rising from the ashes of racial hostility conceals the consequences of discrimination within the ethnic community against women, blue-collar workers, disadvantaged youth, the less educated, and other disadvantaged groups. The vision of a harmoniously united ethnic community has legitimized the authority and identity conceptions of the ethnic leadership. (214)

Considering Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church, there are still many critical interventions to be made through work in both the archive and the field in light of Kurashige’s analysis, particularly around histories of class, gender, and privilege. An exploration of the politics of post-war subject positions in the Seattle community as they intersect with festival practice would be the next research step. As a starting point, however, the final section of this chapter will provide a preliminary history that prompts questions for further investigation even as it offers a perhaps overly “glossy” version of post-war Bon Odori practice. This brief decade-by-decade overview will highlight major
tensions, growth, and leadership transitions that have converged to make the festival what it is today.

*Seattle’s Bon Odori post-war: Tensions, growth, and transitions*

**1945 to 1950**

Beginning in January 1945, Japanese Americans returned to a different Seattle than the one they had been forced to leave. Although “a public sense of guilt, the efforts of civic groups, and the favorable publicity given to the Japanese-American soldiers by the federal government helped to lessen racial tensions and ease the return,” racial tension still existed and elected officials (including Seattle’s mayor and Washington State’s governor) and labor unions were against the return of Japanese Americans to the region (Howard Droker qtd. in Chin 2009, 80). Many did not return or delayed their homecoming, and not to the prewar Nihonmachi enclave. According to Chin, “the Japanese in Seattle prior to World War II totaled nearly 7,000. After the war, the number dropped to some 4,700. It was estimated that 65-70 percent of Seattle’s interned Japanese later returned to the city” (2009, 81). Those who did return came home to vandalized businesses and homes and property no longer under their ownership. The Seattle Buddhist Church temple, new before the war, suffered intentional damage to the hondo (the main temple hall, which was sealed before it was left) by the U.S. Maritime Commission occupants. This physical disarray was matched by initial disarray in temple leadership as leaders gradually began to return and regroup the small number of Sangha
members in Seattle. Also falling into disrepair was the formerly vibrant *Nippon Kan*. Burke and Burke (2011) paint a vivid picture of the immediate postwar environment in Seattle:

> Only a few scattered remnants [of former life] were left to return to. Unfortunately racism persisted. War memorials were desecrated to remove the names of Japanese Americans who had died for their country. Japanese American veterans were shunned and insulted. Their parents were not permitted to apply for citizenship until the 1950s. The Alien Land Laws of Washington State were not changed until 1966. It took three attempts at the polls to revise this law. Given the cultural trauma of these events there were strong divisions within the Japanese American community and there was little desire to publicly celebrate Japanese heritage. Many in the community wished to remain invisible. The churches and Buddhist Temple focused internally. (51)

The first service was held in a makeshift worship space on September 23, 1945, and Reverend Ichikawa finally returned to Seattle Buddhist Church in March of the following year (Magden 2008, 167-71).

Nakatani was one of those who returned to Seattle, and not only did she reestablish the *Hatsune-kai* to teach a new generation of young dancers in her basement-turned-studio a few doors down from the temple, but she also reestablished Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church. The first celebration took place in the temple gym on August 16, 1947, and though it drew only 200 dancers, it was meaningful nonetheless. Growth of this beloved annual event was rapid. First came the move from gym to Main Street in 1948 at the request of the organizers of a new International District Festival (which replaced the prewar Golden Potlatch). By 1949, “thousands of Japanese and Caucasians

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19 According to Magden, the immediate post-war community was only about 300 members strong, whereas there had been around 1,400 Seattle Buddhist Church members prior to the war.
20 For a discussion of Bon Odori in postwar Hawaii and California, see Yano 1985, Waseda 2004, and Waseda 2010.
were participating in [Bon Odori],” reminiscent of the state of things before the war (Magden 2008, 179).

The 1950s

The 1950s saw the continuation of this growth. Frank Hattori, a leading businessman and figure in the temple, negotiated a relationship with Seattle’s newest summer tradition, Seafair, which began in 1950. 21 This (strategic) affiliation (similar to those the temple had previously maintained with Seattle’s Golden Potlatch and the International District Festival) has persisted, making Bon Odori one of Seafair’s oldest sanctioned events today (see chapter 3 for more analysis of this relationship). Seattle Buddhist Church also celebrated its elevation to Betsuin status on March 11, 1954, in a (re)affirmation of the community’s significance. 22

Current dance leader Gwen Kawabata Florence, who has danced in Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori since 1952 (from the age of two), reflected on this period in an interview:

After [my mother’s family] came back from camp – I was born post-camp – [Bon Odori] was very important. When we danced when we were children, this was a safe haven. And not everybody that came to the Buddhist church or came to Obon was Buddhist, like in other cities [in California and Hawaii]. Ours was never like that – it was more of a community thing, and the Buddhist church was like a core for Japanese Americans. After the war [Bon Odori] was a social thing, and not only was it a social thing, it was a safe place for us to be. That weekend was the one weekend of the year where you could feel okay about being Japanese. It was okay to wear your kimono, it was okay to be out there and feel like it was a community, because you couldn’t do that every day. The prejudice when we all came back from camp was just huge. And so for us to come here as a community

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21 For a brief history of Seafair, see Lange 1999 or http://www.seafair.com/subcontent.aspx?SecID=910 (last accessed March 27, 2014).
22 As explained in the introduction, “Betsuin” indicates status as a direct branch of the Kyōto-based head temple of the Nishi Honganji denomination of Jōdo Shinshū. The title of Betsuin is an honor conferred on only a few temples in the United States based on historical, geographical, and size considerations.
on the weekends – well, that’s why this [event] got to be humongous, because everybody came and they felt good about being here.\textsuperscript{23}

The responsibility for Bon Odori dance leadership also changed hands during this period, from Nakatani, an Issei, to Kikue “Kiki” Hagimori, a Nisei. According to Gwen, Nakatani not only selected a successor who would keep the Bon Odori dancers in Seattle moving together, but Nakatani also traveled around the United States (including to Detroit and Chicago) to assist new or recovering Jōdo Shinshū temples with their own festival dancing. Kiki, a Nisei woman born in Seattle in the summer of 1915, began her training in classical dance at age 6 (though not with Nakatani’s Hatsune-kai) and also learned folk dance (Seattle Buddhist Temple 1981). She was incarcerated at Minidoka and returned to the city of her birth after the war. Her husband, Kaoru (“Kay”) was the chairman of the first postwar Bon Odori at the temple. Kiki served as Bon Odori dance leader for 50 years, organizing as well as participating in the dancing herself (unlike Nakatani) from 1952 to 2002 (Lacitis 2006). Over the course of her service, Kiki made some changes to Bon Odori practice, including speeding up the dances to make them more entertaining for younger participants and choreographing new dances (a favorite of which was the baseball choreography in “Yakyu Ken” in honor of Seattle Mariner, Ichiro Suzuki).

The 1960s

The 1960s brought many challenges to Kiki and other festival organizers. In 1962, the World’s Fair was held in Seattle at the same time as Bon Odori, drawing an estimated 100,000 people to the temple event (including members of temples in California and

\textsuperscript{23} Gwen Kawabata Florence, interview with author, Seattle Buddhist Church, August 14, 2013.
Oregon) (Magden 2008, 209-212). As they can today, attendees were able to tour the temple space, learn from cultural and historical exhibitions in the gym, enjoy something to eat, and, of course, dance. Footage from the World’s Fair Bon Odori was included on the first international satellite exchange of live television programming – Telstar’s “America to Europe” program on July 23, 1962 (Long 2008; Magden 2008, 209).

Beginning in the later part of the decade and continuing through the 1980s, Seattle became a major site of activism in post-war campaigns for redress, the movement for recognition and reparation for the incarceration of Japanese Americans by the U.S. government.24 The Seattle Buddhist Church, according to Magden, would soon “play a major role” in this movement, through financial support of campaign materials, through institutional backing and alliance with several other local organizations, and through the testimony of individual members before the U.S. commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians on September 9, 1981 (Magden 2009, 269-71).

Some challenges were less exciting to take on. The temple community began to lose many Issei, including Reverend Ichikawa and Nakatani, who passed away in 1968 and 1969 respectively. Bon Odori was cancelled these two years for the only time in the history of the event other than the 1941 and 1942 hiatus due to forced relocation and the 1945 and 1946 breaks as temple members returned to Seattle. The cancellation was due to safety concerns, for the “racial turmoil” sweeping the nation did not leave Seattle unaffected, as Magden explains:

The 1967 Bon Odori Committee had scaled back the number of dances and food booths because of nearby street confrontations between African Americans and the police. On June 20, 1968, Police Chief Frank Ramon appeared before the

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24 See Shimabukuro 2000 for a local history of this activism.
Betsuin Board of Directors and the Bon Odori Committee to speak about safety measures for next month’s Seafair festival. According to the board minutes, “The chief stated that he could not give us 100% guarantee of safety. He added that if we drop out we are bowing to the will of a minority of lawbreakers and will spur them on to further incidents.” In spite of Chief Ramon’s appeal, and after lengthy discussion, the Bon Odori Committee canceled the event and the board of directors concurred. Two days after Seafair began, July 29, 1968, the Seattle Police searched the Black Panther headquarters and arrested two leaders, Aaron Dixon and Curtis Harris, both students at the University of Washington. Four days of rioting occurred, particularly around Garfield High School [a diverse public high school about a mile away from Seattle Buddhist Church]. (228-29)

Though the rioting did not result in physical damage to the Seattle temple, there were some muggings of older women attending services on Sundays and a pervasive tension that temple leaders opted to respond to by requesting support from local police rather than becoming involved with protest. As Magden explains, “in the aftermath of the demonstrations, Frank Hattori [a major figure not only in the Seattle Buddhist Church but in the Seattle Japanese-American community] recommended the board begin dialogues with the Black Panthers. However, the majority voted not to get involved” (229).

The 1970s through the 90s

Bon Odori was resumed in 1970 (according to Magden, by a Board of Directors vote of 12 to 9), and by the end of this period, the ethnic diversity of the event’s attendees was celebrated as one of its key features. Seattle’s Bon Odori tradition, now well established, grew even stronger. The temple had a documentary of the 1981 festival produced by a local company (Seattle Buddhist Temple 1981). Highlights include footage

25 For more on the mixed responses of Japanese Americans to race riots and the Black Power movement, see Kurashige 2002. Nisei Week was cancelled in 1965 after the Watts riots in fear that the event “would invite trouble from ‘angry blacks’” (152). As Kurashige explains, “the apparent contrast between ‘successful’ Japanese Americans and ‘angry’ African Americans would become fixed in America’s racial consciousness” (152). Some in the Japanese American community wanted to perpetuate this distinction because of the safety it seemed to promise for a Japanese-American “model minority” status, while others wanted to challenge the distinction in keeping with the Civil Rights Movement’s campaign against racism and inequality.

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of the dancing; a tour of the temple and the gym displays; a performance by the visiting Kinnara Taiko ensemble from Los Angeles; and interviews with ministers, Seattle’s mayor, and Kiki. When asked during the interview if one has to be trained to join in, Kiki replied, “No, no…Bon Odori is a day when everyone dances for enjoyment. It’s not something you do on the stage, so everyone is welcome.”

Also in 1981, according to Burke and Burke’s history of the Nippon Kan, the hall held a “Bon Odori Disco” (which continued for several years) in which young “Japanese Americans and their friends came straight into the hall from the festival wearing their kimonos and danced to the latest disco music” (2011, 89).

Two recognitions gave particular cause for celebration in the Japanese-American community. The first was the temple’s inclusion on the national register of historic places in 1984 as part of the Seattle Chinatown historical district. The second was the success of the campaign for redress, which was finally realized on August 10, 1988 with President Reagan’s signing of the Civil Liberties Act. The document acknowledged and apologized for the “grave injustice” of the “fundamental violations of the basic civil liberties and constitutional rights” on the part of the federal government during the war, and financed the payment of reparations to formerly-incarcerated individuals and the establishment of public education programs “so as to prevent the recurrence of any similar event” (Yamato 2013).

The early 2000s

Kiki passed on the responsibility – and opportunity – of being at the helm of Bon Odori dancing to Gwen Kawabata Florence (a Sansei woman) in 2002. Kiki mentored Gwen – who had studied nihon buto with Nakatani and danced Bon Odori under her
watchful eye – as a dance leader and, ultimately, choreographer. Gwen’s mother grew up in Seattle, so although the family was part of the Tacoma Buddhist Temple during Gwen’s childhood, Gwen and her siblings danced in Seattle every summer. The family included both Buddhists and Christians, but everyone participated in Bon Odori. Gwen’s classical training with Nakatani’s *Hatsune-kai* began at a young age, and many of her peers from her dance school cohort serve as dance leaders in Bon Odori today, including two of Nakatani’s granddaughters.26

By the time she reached university in the late 1960s, Gwen was serving as a dance leader in the Tacoma Bon Odori and soon received an invitation from Kiki to help at the Seattle event. Over the course of the following decades, Kiki “guided us [dance leaders] through everything,” Gwen explained, “and she was there all along.” Nakatani imparted important lessons about precision of timing and execution of gesture. But it was Kiki who taught Gwen how to choreograph new dances or alter old ones to fit the timing of the music, the varying levels of skill of festival participants, and the challenges of the Seattle venue (where the dancing takes place on a hill).27

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26 Gwen described how the effects of her classical training and a special kinesthetic empathy with her cohort manifest in the women’s gestures as adults, even in the folk dance idiom of Bon Odori (see chapter 2): “If you watch us – the 6 or 8 of [her former students leading the dancing today] – there’s very little variation between the way that we move. And if you look at pictures – I am amazed. Our bodies, our feet, everything is in the same position. [It’s something] that was instilled in us from when we were really little.”

27 According to Gwen, Nakatani “was a real stickler about dancing to the music” and Kiki was the same for these intertwined reasons of coordination, skill, and venue: “We have such a difficult venue that we have to take into consideration how we do this [dancing]. Most cities have a *yagura* with leaders on it and you can see what they’re doing, but because we can’t see [from every vantage point] we have to dance to the rhythm, and we have always danced to the rhythm of the music.” Seattle dancers do move with the rhythm and all at the same pace through the dances, but these dance phrases are not matched to particular phrases in the music. There is not always consistency about when the dancing starts in relation to the music, so phrases might not always line up the same way in every performance. Van Zile (1982) noted the same thing in her own fieldwork: “The movement sequence simply continues to repeat in direct relationship to the basic musical pulse, but without regard to the overall musical form, until the end of the music. The dance may end in the middle of a movement phrase if timing happens to work that way. [...] Non-alignment of movement and musical phrases...may be attributable in part to the use of recorded music” (30).
Kiki’s dedication to Bon Odori – “holding court on the *yagura*” as she oversaw the dances and then “taking her kimono off to go downstairs and make *somen* until three in the morning every year,” according to Gwen – did not stop after she was no longer able to serve as dance leader and choreographer. She had crafted another strong leader in Gwen, who passed the test Kiki used to demonstrate that it was time for leadership to change hands: “One day [Kiki] just came in, sat down, handed me the music and said, ‘Gwen, make a dance.’” Early in Gwen’s tenure as head dance instructor, respect for her predecessor (who was still living) took precedent. During Kiki’s last years, Gwen led the same nine dances at Bon Odori, not changing anything in honor of Kiki’s legacy. Gwen also made sure the Kiki attended Bon Odori to watch what she had worked for many years to craft.

After staying for one more summer Obon, Kiki died at age 91 on September 12, 2006. After Kiki’s passing, Gwen did begin to introduce some of her own changes to Bon Odori and these curatorial moves are discussed further in chapter 2. The first major change, however, was one that contained an acknowledgement of Kiki’s influence. At the 2007 event (Kiki’s *Hatsubon* year), a new song and dance debuted to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori. In “Seattle Omoide” (which is analyzed in the conclusion of this thesis), one stanza of lyrics “nod[s] to friends and to those who have passed away, / Sensei Kiki dances next to me / on this happy day.” Even though it rained in Seattle for Bon Odori that year, Gwen said, “I was *determined* that we were going to dance” – for Kiki and for all of those who had come before her.
Conclusion

As this chapter’s historical overview of Seattle practice has suggested, Bon Odori makes for a powerful case of expressive, collective remembering in order to reflect on and reframe community in the present. If Asian Americans in the United States from the mid 19th-century through World War II (and also after the war) experience a distancing “along racial lines […] from the terrain of national culture,” that prejudice and discrimination resulted in “the emergence of Asian American culture as an alternative cultural site and the place where the contradictions of immigrant history are read, performed, and critiqued” (Lowe 1996, ix-x). For Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest, Bon Odori remained a space for those readings, performances, and critiques to occur.28

More work remains to be done, but in each historical period it is clear that Bon Odori was an opportunity to reflect on the situation of the present as informed by the past. It was an opportunity to cohere community through participatory expressive cultural practice – not “concentrat[ing] on imperfections but celebrat[ing] idealized notions of past and present” (Kurashige 2002, 214). The history of festival practice in Seattle reveals strategic moves – of inventing a tradition in 1932 with connections to a (perhaps imagined) Japanese past, of dancing in camp, of reclaiming a Japanese-American identity in the post-war period – in the same dance space in which participants repeat choreographic moves.

Bon Odori’s long history continues to be danced with and, in fact, choreographed, in the present. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) writes, “heritage is a mode of

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28 Nikkei is an umbrella term to refer to people of Japanese descent, regardless of citizenship status or generation.
cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (7), meaning that it is
“constantly constituted and renewed” (242). When festival organizers advertise the 2013
event as the 81st annual Bon Odori, they count 1932 as their starting point and ignore the
several years of hiatus, letting the “81st” label convey the sense of continuity and tradition
– real, imagined, or somewhere in between – that do the work of binding Bon Odori’s
present to its past.
Chapter 2: Moving

*Everyone -- ‘kachi-kachi’ -- all in sync,*
*Colorful kimono fill the street,*
*Taiko keeps the beat...*

**Thursday, June 27  Teachers’ Practice¹**

“Okay. We have three new dances this year,” Gwen says, and the Bon Odori teachers’ practice begins without ceremony. I am glad to have been invited to attend this private rehearsal, which is taking place a few weeks before dance practices open to the public will be held.

We start by learning “Kawachi Otoko Bushi,” first by watching a few of Gwen’s core group of instructors demonstrate the cycle of movements as Gwen narrates. I stand at the periphery with everyone else while these select dancers begin to move...their hands tracing oval patterns as their feet step forward right-left-right-left...the left hand reaching for an imaginary kimono sleeve to hold...the right hand slicing away from the body and then gently turning palm up, palm down, palm up... I am thankful when Gwen breaks the fluid motions down into smaller parts, explaining proper hand and foot positions, cueing us as we all fall into a large circle to practice the series of gestures. I realize that I lack the movement vocabulary that would make learning the dances easier, so I struggle more than the others even though this is a new dance to all of us. I can tell others are being mindful about maintaining an appropriate distance between themselves and other dancers, but I’m too busy trying to get the basic patterns of arms, hands, and legs right to modulate how big my gestures are and how much space I’m taking up.

Then the music from the boom box in the corner starts, the chu-daiko (medium-sized drum) player begins an orienting rhythmic pattern, and we all groan because the tempo is much faster than our nascent sense of this dance had planned for. The core group of instructors forms its own smaller circle inside our larger one, and we begin. Watching them becomes difficult because of constantly shifting perspectives. I position myself behind someone who, by virtue of the fluidity of her motions, seems to know what she is doing. Even though we are all learning new dances, I am not a particularly quick study in comparison to the others, not getting the hang of things until we’ve done many repetitions of the movement cycle. Just when I think I’ve got it, I make a misstep. By the very end of the music, I can observe some subtleties of motion, however, trying to mimic

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¹ As the introduction to this thesis explained, my response to the reflexive imperative in ethnographic work (see Jackson 1998; Ruskin and Rice 2012; Titon 2002) and Aaron Turner’s call for “embodied ethnography” (2000) is to write my presence “in the field” and my processes of learning into this text. I do so through the inclusion of expanded fieldnote excerpts, which are of particular importance in this chapter. These excerpts are presented in italics.
the graceful hands, the slightly higher arms, rather than just getting myself from point A to point B.

I fare better on “Kawachi” than on any of the other dances we practice this evening, because after learning a few new-to-everyone dances it’s time for the teachers to do a fast-paced review of some of the dozen or so dances that are already in their repertoire. There is no step-by-step learning for these, and for this portion of practice, the gym is divided: one area for the teachers who only need a danced-through refresher to remind their bodies of the motions, and another smaller circle in the back for “everyone else.” As an “everyone else,” I benefit from being in the same circle as the four members of the Japanese Queen’s court, the only people here tonight who are close to me in age and lack of skill. I apply Gwen’s words to them to my own situation: “You don’t need to worry about mastering the dances tonight. This is about being exposed to them, and then you can refine them later.” Well, I’m going to need a lot of refining.

“Sakura Ondo” – try not to hit anyone with my cherry blossoms. “Mi Kokoro” – don’t get taken by surprise by the two backward steps and run into the person in front of you by accidentally moving forward instead. “Oyama Ondo” – what foot do you start with? “Dai Tōkyō Ondo”...“Fukushima Ondo”...“Seattle Omoide”...information saturation point... My movements feel jerky, too large, and perpetually behind as I’m watching and copying rather than anticipating the next steps.

Rehearsal concludes with a review of the new dances we’d learned two hours before. I freeze, trying to conjure up a fragment of the “Kawachi” melody or a verbal script of the pattern of gestures, but I can’t explicitly recall music or motions. But once the music starts and I see the others take their first steps, my body falls into sync and things start to come back – not perfectly, but mostly. It’s going to be awhile before I feel this way about any of the other dances, but I relish the sensation of returning to something familiar, something my body already knows, however partially.

**Introduction**

Having engaged with the content of remembering by tracing the history of Bon Odori practice at Seattle Buddhist Church, the next move is to consider the means of this remembering by focusing on the dancing body itself. There are particular ways of knowing and ways of being-in-the-world that are cultivated in the embodied experience of Bon Odori dancing. Engaging with the ideas of “body memory” (Casey 2000), “inner time” (Schütz 1951), “kinesthetic empathy” (Hahn 2007, and others), and “cultivation” (Yuasa [1977] 1987), this chapter will explore the cultivated corporeality that renders the endeavor of celebratory commemoration successful.
Sustaining community memory and cohering a sense of community identity can be accomplished in various ways, from text- and image-based efforts (like Denshō’s displays about Internment), to place-based efforts (like the annual Minidoka Pilgrimage), to the time-based cyclical observances of Buddhist holidays from year to year. Embodied experiences, however, offer a particular – and particularly powerful – mode of connecting the individual self to the communities of past and present by revealing the self as “always already intertwined” with others (Casey 2000, 250). By moving with the body as the “existential ground of culture,” this chapter will consider ways of engaging with the past that are not based in historical narrative (Csordas 1998, 5; see also Ahlgren 2011, Taylor 2003).

Head dance leader Gwen Kawabata Florence’s strategic curatorial moves in dance selection, rehearsal, and performance engage and enable others to embody a choreographed history, dancing with the past. Her work and that of other festival organizers helps those who dance – including the ethnographer – to experience the benefits and imperatives of their participation. One of the outcomes, this chapter will argue, is that participatory dance becomes a means of cultivating an “ethical modalit[y] of being,” as C. Jason Throop claims in the case of Yapese dance (2009, 179). Bon Odori dancing’s choreographed intercorporeality embodies the Buddhist concepts of interdependence and impermanence in a performative expression of okagesamade. As Reverend Masao Kodani of Los Angeles’ Senshin Buddhist Temple writes, okagesamade is a grateful “expression of the interconnectedness of things,” an acknowledgement of the fact that the actions of others make your life possible. Bon Odori is, ultimately, a danced version of this expression: “Thanks to the many causes and conditions known and
unknown, I have the privilege of coming to this moment” where past and present converge (Kodani 1992, 65).

Saturday, July 13

Graveside Obon service at Lakeview Cemetery

From the top of the hill at Lakeview Cemetery, you can see the Olympics, the Cascades, Lake Washington, and Lake Union on a sunny Seattle summer day like today. A beautiful resting place. There’s a tall monument for Japanese-American veterans from the region, inscribed with the names of those who served alongside the words of Franklin Roosevelt: “Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart. Americanism is not and never was a matter of race or ancestry.” I stand at the base of the monument, listening to Reverend Castro chant and stepping forward when it is my turn to offer incense in the small burner he has set up. There are only two others here with us to participate in this ritual, a husband and wife in their 80s. After a brief moment of silence at the monument, Mrs. Ohtani turns to Reverend Castro and confirms that her family plot is next. As we drive to the other end of the cemetery, the Ohtanis point out various plots along the way where they used to stop to perform graveside services for temple members. But since there are no family members here with us today, we will not stop. “This isn’t my religion,” Mr. Ohtani explains to me as his wife places flowers on the headstones of her parents and sister. But Buddhist or not, he offers incense as Reverend Castro chants again, respectful of the commemorative gesture. Afterward as I walk past the rows of grave markers toward the gates, I think about how little time we make today in general to remember – to pause and reflect on how our lives today are not possible without the work, love, struggle, and perseverance of those who came before us. If there were only four of us at Lakeview today, how many will there be next year?

Embodied commemoration

The large turnout for the Bon Odori festival a week later was an entirely different commemorative experience from the intimate graveside services at Lakeview Cemetery. Beyond the contrast between the solemn and the celebratory, the perhaps more private and the perhaps more public, what are the affordances of Bon Odori’s particular kind of commemoration that compel participation in ways distinct from some of the other opportunities for ritualized remembering during and around Obon season?  

2 In addition to cemetery services, these opportunities include a special Obon/Hatsuobon temple service on the Sunday prior to the festival that especially honors those who have passed away in the previous year and their families; an annual pilgrimage to Minidoka in early summer; an Atomic Bomb Memorial service in
In his comprehensive phenomenological examination of remembering, Edward Casey stresses the being-with inherent in commemoration as “something thoroughly communal,” and the central role of the body in commemorative acts (2000, 217). Remembering is not limited to the realm of cognition, nor is it solely experienced through verbal narrative. Casey argues that remembering is more than just recollection; indeed, when remembering is made collective through commemoration, it is fundamentally social and embodied. Whereas recollection is characterized by “inherent solipsism,” commemoration’s imperative is collective participation in which “the divisive dualisms of body/mind, self/other, and past/present are suspended” (2000, 265). Anthropologist Michael Jackson has made the same points in the context of Warlpiri ontology: memory is fundamentally social, “never merely a cognitive process, the past recollected in tranquility. […] It entails concerted, concentrated, embodied interaction with [others] to recreate modes of intersubjectivity that encompass both the living and the dead” (1998, 129).

When participants are “thrust headlong into a crowd of co-rememberers” in Bon Odori, they strengthen connections to the past and to the community of the present (Casey 2000, 217). One elderly woman thanked Reverend Castro for his Obon service, explaining that she lost her husband 36 years ago: “Sometimes it feels like yesterday, she said, and sometimes I forget – and I don’t want to forget.” Facilitated remembering with the support of the community offers particular solace to Hatsubon families who have lost loved ones in the past year. Loss, no matter its proximity to the present (and Obon brings early August; and “From Hiroshima to Hope,” an intercultural and interfaith evening of remembrance on August 6th that culminates in floating hundreds of lanterns on Seattle’s Green Lake.

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the past closer to the present for a few days every summer), is a tender yet essential part of the human condition. The support of a community of co-rememberers and participation in the expressive practice of dance help people accept the reality of loss – even if that reality is intensified during Obon – by fostering an orientation to experience that celebrates the impact of the lives of loved ones on their own (see the discussion of the concept of *okagesamade* later in this chapter). In his Obon service Dharma Talk, Castro shared a story that is familiar to many Buddhists, but is particularly appropriate to retell at this time of year: the story of Kisa Gotami and the Mustard Seed. In order to teach the woman whose child has died that everyone experiences loss, the Buddha instructs her to get mustard seed from the house of a family in which no one has died as medicine for her deceased child – a task she soon realizes is impossible.³

Commemoration is meaningful in its being done with others, action as important as togetherness.⁴ Irene Goto, a Ministers’ Assistant at Seattle Buddhist Church, explained:

> I am coming to realize that all these rituals – and I consider Bon Odori a ritual – are a way for me to have a closer relationship with everyone. If we don’t *do* things, then we are not really living. I’m trying to come to terms with why we have rituals, and I think *doing* things – doing ritual – makes your beliefs more grounded.⁵

³ For a complete translation of the story as it appears in the *Saddharmaratna-valiya*, see Ranjini Obeyesekere’s *Portraits of Buddhist Women: Stories from the Saddharmaratna-valiya* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁴ There is a resonance here with the Buddhist idea of impermanence, not only in the need to re-perform and re-affirm, but also in the particular mindful appreciation for the relationships with and within the present moment that the awareness of impermanence cultivates. Casey recognizes that in whatever form it takes, “memorializing is accomplished – the past is concretely honored – by *taking action together*” (2000, 277, emphasis in the original).

⁵ Irene Goto, interview with author, Seattle Buddhist Church, August 4, 2013. Though Goto approaches this idea from her own religious background and training, those for whom Bon Odori does not involve spiritual or religious significance might still appreciate these words since beliefs can occur in secular, social, and/or cultural realms (e.g. the belief in the importance of family).
The dancing body is central in the doing of Bon Odori’s commemorative ritual. For both those who consider themselves dancers and those who consider themselves non-dancers during the rest of the year, this creative expression is marked as something special in both content and process. Dance makes the private self and personal body part of an intersubjective and intercorporeal collective, enfolding the individual into the communal. The following sections will explore further how Bon Odori dancing facilitates the cultivation of a particular relationality to past and/as present.

**Thursday, July 11  Public Practice #4**

*At last night’s rehearsal, someone gave me the tip to focus on just getting the arms right, since that’s what is most noticeable and what others are paying attention to. At Bon Odori, it will be so crowded that no one will be watching your feet. My feet are what need practice now, that and being better about anticipating the next gesture in the pattern. Seiko told me yesterday that the key to these dances is knowing how and when to shift your weight to transition from one motion into another. Luckily each dance’s pattern is repeated enough times as we work our way around the gym that I can start to feel a change by the time the music stops: the motions finding homes in my arms, hands, and feet rather than being confined to mental verbal cues.*

*I find myself watching Seiko dance when I can tonight, not only because I interviewed her about her Obon experiences and her grandmother, Fukuko Nakatani, right before practice, but because her gestures are so clear and intentional that those of us not trained in dance can follow more easily. Though I still have a way to go, the dances feel more settled in my body now: I can approach “Mi Kokoro” with extra care and awareness as I gasshō (bowing with palms together) toward the center of the circle, I can focus on the positioning of my uchiwa fans when Elsie gives me tips as she dances by, I can feel almost graceful during “Hanagasa Ondo” with my borrowed sensu even though I’d initially been intimidated by this dance. During a break, Seiko tells me that she has been watching me, noticing my improvements, which are in fact mirroring her example. When I ask a question about one of the dances, she laughs, saying that she can’t answer when someone asks about the number of motions in a pattern or where your feet are at any given moment. But when there’s music, her body knows.*

*As things start feeling more familiar, I wonder if the instructors get bored with the repetition within these dances, the repetition in rehearsal, the repetition of the dances and routine from year to year. Even though there are some new dances added each summer, replacing others that are retired for a few years, there is a core repertoire that stays the same – “Tankō Bushi,” “Sōran Bushi,” “Gōshū Ondo” in particular. But people have been telling me that these dances are their favorites. Repetition isn’t just sameness here; it’s something richer than that.*
Body memory and inner time

Engaging in Bon Odori dancing is a cumulative endeavor, one that is about the continual process rather than about an arrival at a certain degree of skill or proficiency. Thus, it necessitates repetition both within and between Obon seasons. Meryl Tsukiji, a current practitioner of nihon buyo in Seattle who has received her natori in the Fujima School, reflected on this in an interview: “A lot of times the movements are familiar, but dancing is something you learn across many years. When you redo it you notice something you didn’t notice before – you learn something new. It’s intended to be something that happens over time.” Since the present is always in flux and the individual is always changing, there is a new set of circumstances with which to dance every time a dancer steps into the circle; you “take the old and make it new” every time you begin the familiar steps. The excitement of returning to repeat the dances (as well as the familiar routines of rehearsals and performance) is, as 2013 festival Chairman Ron Hamakawa described, “the coming home part of it.”

Casey argues that, fundamentally, “there is no memory without body memory” (2000, 172). Casey describes several types of body memory beginning with the “habitual body memory” that is the first step for the novice Bon Odori dancer, who needs to gain a

6 Meryl Tsukiji, interview with author, Seattle, WA, August 9, 2013. As soon as she started walking, Meryl began her formal dance training under the guidance of Fukuko Nakatani. After Nakatani’s death, Meryl continued with Tazue Sasaki, a Seattle teacher from a different nihon buyo school (the Fujima School). Meryl’s stage name is Fujima Fujimineki. Though she recalls performing on the stage that was set up in the Tea Garden for Nakatani’s students to do nihon buyo performances during the festival, Meryl was discouraged from taking part in the Bon Odori dancing because of the “bad habits” it might encourage. “You have to have a really strong, stable dance identity,” she explained, “to be able to be careful about how you get influenced.” Though she is not a Bon Odori instructor, she is involved as a dance coach for participants in the Japanese Queen Scholarship Organization of Washington’s annual competition (see chapter 3).

7 A phrase from the chorus of “Mottainai,” one of the new dances performed at Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori in 2013.

8 Ron Hamakawa, interview with author, Seattle Buddhist Church, August 14, 2013.
basic movement vocabulary and string those gestures into the choreographic unit repeated for each particular song. But through practice and “kinesthetic empathy” (Hahn 2007, 83) with instructors and other dancers, she ultimately aims to foster a type of body memory in which the past is not determinative of the present but is engaged with in the present through the body: “Here the emphasis is not on how the past insinuates itself into the present but on how it is deployed there and carried on into the future. […] The past, rather than taking over the present from within, is material for the present (and its future)” (Casey 2000, 168). This sophisticated engagement with what Schütz would call the “inner time” of the dance creates room for both the individual subjectivity of the dancer and the long history of the dance as an artistic object experienced by many (Schütz 1951, 89).

In developing the idea of inner time, Schütz is interested in the processes through which the meaning of a musical work is created and experienced through relationships between and among composer, performer(s), and listener(s). These social actors need not be physically present at the same time for a web of connection to be formed; instead, Schütz argues, the shared process of experiencing the polythetic nature of a musical work is what creates a connection – even over centuries – as the piece is continually re-experienced. A co-experiencing of inner time creates a perceived sense of social and historical co-presence among listeners, or in the case of Bon Odori, dancers. Memories and histories are nested like the concentric rings in which the dancers themselves move, and meaning is made in the present through a choreographed, artistic engagement with the past. In a Turnerian suspension of time out of time, the exigencies of “outer time” are set aside in favor of sharing inner time, binding the private recollecting self to a
community of commemorators, both past and present. In Bon Odori, body memory allows participants to access inner time, the odaiko player demarcates common points in the flow of it, and the dance instructors model a particularly deft way of navigating it. Even if “outer time” is changed – a song is sped up, a dance is shortened or extended by a few minutes – the inner time of the dance remains intact, since inner time is less about duration and more about connection to others who are experiencing the same presence in the dance flow. Schütz calls the process of constituting relationship through expressive cultural practices the “mutual tuning-in relationship.” This “experience of the ‘We’” is accomplished through the “sharing of the other’s flux of experiences in inner time, [a] living through a vivid present in common” (92). Bon Odori’s commemorative nature collapses historical time into inner time, allowing those dancing together in the present to also dance with those who have danced before.

Tuesday, July 16        Public Practice #6

Tonight is the last night of practice at Seattle Buddhist Church before the two days of Bon Odori begin on Saturday. I enter the gym with a sense of easy familiarity – familiarity with the routine, but also with the faces of the friends I greet upon arrival. There are more people to chat with than there is time, since tonight’s rehearsal accomplishes the feat of running through all of the dances for this year except for “Tankō Bushi.” We even add in the popular “Shiawase Samba” just in case there ends up being time for it on the festival schedule. There is a feeling of anticipatory excitement mixed with bittersweet appreciation in the crowded gym since this our last opportunity to practice together. Seattle Matsuri Taiko and some of the Regional Taiko Group members are here for a final rehearsal of the live accompaniment of “Fukushima Ondo” and “Seattle Omoide.” As the vocalists sing, “Bon Odori makes me feel alive,” I swing the old but still brightly-colored kachi-kachi Seiko gifted me at last night’s practice.

Tonight I negotiate that now-familiar balance between observing, documenting, and participating. My participation in the dancing and, more importantly, my improvement, is the way I can most meaningfully express my desire for understanding and my respect for people, process, art, and event. My dancing tonight feels more confident, my motions smoother and more consistent. Gwen only ever offers corrections to the dance leaders, but her position in the center of all the concentric circles as we practice affords her a perspective from which she can keep tabs on the rest of us.
There are a few points of difficulty in some of the dances – step with your left foot first on “Oyama Ondo,” left arm goes forward while right foot goes back on “Hanabi Ondo,” and don’t forget that there’s a unique opening sequence to “Seattle Omoide” that always goes by too quickly. In spite of my errors, people tell me I’m catching on fast. I still don’t feel as comfortable with “Sōran Bushi” and “Gōshū Ondo,” mainly since these classics are so well known that we haven’t spent time breaking them down. But when we do them tonight for the last time here in the gym, I feel pulled in by them, my hesitations and moments of uncertainty in the steps giving way to a broader sweep of appreciation for the feeling of dancing together and creating something with this group in this moment. As I leave the gym at the end of practice, the sounds of Matsuri Taiko carry me to my car. Even though it’s after 9 p.m., the kids are still playing, working to fine-tune the flourishes of their bachi (the wooden sticks used to play the taiko drums) in anticipation of Saturday’s performance.

**Intercorporeality and kinesthetic empathy**

In Bon Odori, being in “We-relationship” with a community of co-commemorators (both past and present) begins with what Tomie Hahn calls “kinesthetic empathy” in her 2007 ethnography, *Sensational Knowledge* (83). Hahn crafts an intimate portrait of the world of *nihon buyo* from her perspective as practitioner and ethnographer as she analyzes the details of transmission from teacher to student. Kinesthetic empathy is an empathy rooted in the body that draws on kinesthesia – the sense that comprehends the body’s weight, spatial orientation, and movement of muscles, tendons, and joints. Kinesthetic empathy is mediated via visual and tactile modes of transmission (Bakan 1999: 281-291; Sklar 2001; Smyth 1984). It plays an important role in movement transference, in which a dancer, experiencing and

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9 The idea of kinesthetic empathy has a long history in dance studies. In addition to the citations included in the passage from Hahn’s text quoted here, see Sklar 1991, Sklar 1994, Foster 2005, Sklar 2008, Foster 2011, Cooper Albright 2011, and Reynolds and Reason 2012. I draw from Hahn here because of her application of this term in the particular context of Japanese dance. Sklar’s most basic definition of kinesthetic empathy is “the capacity to participate with another’s movement or another’s sensory experience of movement” (1994, 15). Sklar cites Martin (1939) as the first use of the term in dance studies, but points to Dilthey (1914) as using it in anthropological writing earlier. Responding to the critique that “empathy refers to emotional responses and therefore denies a place to reason in the apprehension of dance,” Sklar argues that she uses empathy “in reference not to emotional responses but to kinetic ones. Kinesthetic empathy, for me, is a mode of apprehending kinetic qualities, no more or less reasonable than the mode of apprehending words” (2001, 199n3). In the context of Bon Odori, kinesthetic empathy is a means of learning in the sense Sklar argues. But as the discussion of *okagesamade* later in this chapter will show, kinesthetic empathy here also involves an ethico-moral dimension as participants learn to emulate the particular orientation to the experience of being in the world that the dance leaders model.
physically identifying closely with the movements of a teacher, sympathetically coordinates her muscles to resemble the teacher’s dance. The alignment between bodies imprints movement and reinforces kinesthetic empathy for future lessons. (84)

There are teachers to follow in the gym and out in the street where Bon Odori dancers make their moves. But kinesthetic empathy works differently in this crowded space mixing sociability and group learning than in the *nihon buyo* studio’s individual lesson, even though the processes of observation and attunement are similar. The visual mode mediates transmission almost exclusively here, since the practicalities of a group learning environment and the goals of the practice (the desire for participation rather than perfection, and the absence of teacher-student closeness as a pedagogical requirement) preclude corrective touch as in *nihon buyo* instruction. But the greater distance between “students” (or participants) and teachers translates into greater closeness between students. So although there is a hierarchy of expertise and a quite literal inner circle in Bon Odori dancing, the overall feeling is something more democratic – a collective feeling of dancing a community into being. The lesson, the performance, and the student-teacher relationship give way to something larger that is at stake, namely, the doing of culture to (re)define it in the present context (see Turner 2000 and chapter 3) and the negotiation of identity politics happening within a large group of participants.

The “how” of these actions lies in the particular kind of kinesthetic empathy that occurs: the individual dancer coordinates her movements with those of the instructors, but she also watches her peers, the other members of the outer circles that she herself is a part of. She prefers to follow the instructors when she can, for though they are not infallible, the teachers offer greater consistency, clarity, and fluidity of motion. But
because the concentric circles of dancers move at different rates, her perspective is constantly shifting and she finds herself looking for another exemplar when the instructors moves out of sight or into a position that makes it difficult to sync gestures. So she learns to sometimes follow her neighbors and works to improve her own movements so that she does not lead others astray in case they are using her motions as guides. Thus, in Bon Odori, kinesthetic empathy radiates throughout the dance space, not only unidirectionally from teacher to student, but between instructors and between peer participants so that the individual feels connected to the collective.

These chains of watching artistically perform the existential relationship of self and other as “dancers actively learn to see and be seen” (Hahn 2007, 83). One watches to learn and then learns to be watched. This is a dance in and of itself, for even as the individual dancer becomes more confident in the steps there is always another layer of nuance to appreciate and work into the individual’s practice. Using a series of graduated sieves as an apt metaphor for her ability to perceive, comprehend, and embody increasing levels of detail, Hahn arrives at the conclusion that “learning to follow (acquiring finer sieves) is a life-long challenge” (86). This connects back to the importance of repetition in Bon Odori dancing – from the movement cycle within each dance to the yearly cycle of practice and performance in the summer months.

Mediated memories are not the same as body memory, and though they can serve as prompting reminders of which foot steps first, they cannot produce the feeling of shared inner time that comes from moving with others – even if those motions are
slightly different than they were last rehearsal or last year. Thus, the mode of learning and transmitting Bon Odori dances at Seattle Buddhist Church is primarily based in “the art of following” (Hahn 2007, 87). Seeing and being seen and the resulting kinesthetic empathy are precursors to creating embodied memory and experiencing the shared access to inner time that connects present and past. This is what is happening when “we…envision and embody dance” together (Hahn 83) – we create a We. As Casey recognizes, “whenever commemorating occurs, a community arises. Not only is something communal being honored, but the honoring itself is a communal event, a collective engagement” in which “the body’s role […] is altogether central” (2000, 235-36, 245).

10 Sometimes watching and being watched in the practice space is mediated through the use of cell phones, tablets, and cameras as participants create personal digital archives. The issue of self-documentation as memory aide is separate from the issue of documentation as consumption of a cultural product (explored in chapter 3) or mediated sources of inspiration (e.g. YouTube videos) for the selection and creation of new dances. At both the teachers’ practice and the public practices, instructors (during the former) and participants (during the latter) filmed clips of the dances they had trouble with (the three new ones in particular) and wanted assistance in remembering or practicing at home. I was initially engaged in a similar effort, but I quickly realized that in my own learning of the dances there was no substitute for dancing in the circle with the group. Transcriptions of the dances made by a woman with her natori in nihon buyo were no exception. Though these materials existed as reminders of “correct” practice, they were partial representations at best, capturing a single iteration (video) or an idealized version (transcription) of a dance. They are therefore not accommodating of the flexible nature of the dances. Bon Odori dances at Seattle Buddhist Church are intentionally changed for accessibility and/or aesthetic appeal and probably accrue less intentional alterations over the years as well, given the primarily oral and embodied transmission of practice. So while an instructor might stash in the sleeve of her kimono a list of dances with margin notes as quick reminders to herself, she knows she has to remain flexible if and when something changes. When confusion about a dance arose in a rehearsal of Bon Odori dances at a community folk dance circle comprising about a dozen women, no one consulted the videos at least two dancers had with them. Even though one of my interlocutors had previously explained the benefits of having video to settle disputes over details, the group elected to skip to another dance rather than practice incorrectly and thus commit to memory something we were not sure about. As one woman explained to me, one has to be flexible with these dances since things change and every teacher moves slightly differently, ultimately looking to the head leader, Gwen, for choreographic decisions. For a discussion of mediation and transmission in nihon buyo, see Hahn 2007, p. 135ff.
Cultivation

The importance of the embodied experience having been explained, what are the opportunities, benefits, and imperatives of positioning the self in the circle of Bon Odori dancers? Bon Odori practice may be understood from the vantage of Yuasa Yasuo’s “philosophy of cultivation,” a summative interpretation of a core idea spanning centuries of Japanese religious, artistic, and philosophical thought ([1977] 1987, 17). Comfortably encompassing the writings of Kūkai and Dōgen, Bergson and Merleau-Ponty, contemporary psychologists and Japanese philosophers, Yuasa’s *The Body* explores how cultivation in bodily practices (from meditation to martial arts) is both a corrective to the false perception of mind-body dualism and a path to the development of moral and ethical personhood.

For Yuasa, neither dualism nor parallelism characterizes the association of mind and body. Instead, the mind-body is a complex in which the cognitive and the physical exist in what Thomas P. Kasulis calls “internal relation” that can be cultivated through particular practices (2011, 25). As Kasulis explains in his introduction to Yuasa’s text,

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11 Yuasa’s theorization of cultivation (as a process with cognitive and embodied effects for practitioners, as well as one with a long history in Buddhist thought and Japanese modes of artistry) is useful in considering Bon Odori dancing as experienced by my interlocutors and by myself. I do not say this purely because Yuasa is a Japanese philosopher and the Bon Odori practice I am investigating is a result of Japanese diaspora; indeed, it is important to remember that Bon Odori in the Pacific Northwest has been a Japanese-American tradition for nearly a century. I think Yuasa’s understanding of the mind-body complex is applicable as a general strategy of thought about practices of expressive culture – as a corrective to the potential pitfall of reinforcing duality as we incorporate ideas of bodily knowledge into our understandings of artistic practice. That the Japanese classical and folk dance traditions – as artistic practices governed by particular aesthetics and particular teaching methods – have a history and contemporary relevance in this festival is an additional reason to apply Yuasa’s ideas.

12 Kasulis’ differentiates between internal and external relations as follows: “Most Japanese philosophers have historically favored the understanding of relations as being internal instead of external. That is, if I say ‘a and b are related,’ the paradigm of external relations assumes that a and b can exist independently, but insofar as there is a relation between them, a third factor R is required to connect the two. By contrast, the paradigm of internal relations assumes that if I say ‘a and b are related,’ I mean that a and b are intrinsically interlinked or overlapping, and that the R is the shared part of a and b” (2011, 25).
Western philosophy (especially since the early modern period) has tended to think of the mind and body as two separate entities related in some still controversially defined manner. The thrust of modern Western thought has been to isolate and define that essential relationship between the two entities. In Eastern thought, on the other hand, the mind-body has generally been viewed from the start as a single system, and the emphasis has been on articulating the evolution of that system from ordinary human life to the highly integrated, exemplary mode: the accomplished artist, theoretical genius, enlightened religious master. [...] The mind-body is an evolving system that can be further developed, integrated, and enhanced. (Kasulis 1987, 31-33)

In everyday understanding and (self-)perception of lived experience, human beings are prone to viewing the mental and the physical as distinct processes. Thus, the oneness that is *a priori* can be fractured, giving rise to an ambiguity in the human experience of mind-body relation. “Oneness of body-mind,” or shinjin ichinyo, becomes the ideal for which to strive, the product of a constantly negotiated relationship that we turn to specific cultivating practices to hone (24). Cultivation in the Japanese context began in the realm of religion (*shugyô*, or religious cultivation), but quickly spread to the realm of expressive culture. Cultivation in artistry, or *geidô*, involves specific discipline, or *keiko* (20). The conception of the body as object under the control of the mind as subject is inverted as one “learn[s] with the body” (25; cf. Hahn 2007). Though details depend on the expressive genre, the underlying orientation is shared: cultivation is “a practical project aiming at the enhancement of the personality and the training of the spirit by means of the body” (85).

The project of cultivation is ultimately about something more than personality; it is about personhood, about what it means to be a be-ing in the world. A “cultivated mode of relating to the world” is a moral and an ethical result of such a practice (Kasulis 1987, 7). As Throop has convincingly argued in the case of Yapese community dance, this type
of collective expressive endeavor “help[s] individuals craft particular forms of feeling, thinking, appreciating, judging, imagining, and behaving that are consonant with local understandings of the good person, the good life, and right action” (2009, 180).

Participating in Bon Odori dancing similarly “engender[s] particular orientations to experience,” fostering what Throop calls an “ethical modalit[y] of being” (197). This orientation is encompassed by the term *okagesamade*.

*Okagesamade* is a grateful expression of interdependence, of the fact that the actions of others make your life possible. This word – literally an expression of respectful appreciation for one’s shadow – reflects “the hearts and minds of those who realize that they are allowed to be what they are solely because of the efforts of others, both seen and unseen,” both present and past (Yakumo 1995, 8). In everyday usage, *okagesamade* is the standard response to congratulations, and built into this response is the implication that the person being congratulated does not take credit for the success of her efforts (more of a “thanks to you” than a “thank you”). Saying *okagesamade* makes a We between the speaker, the person being addressed, and a community of others who have contributed to making the moment possible. A choreographed display of this particular

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13 Although my interviews were conducted in English and most of my interlocutors were non-Japanese speakers, a few Japanese words circulated in our conversations. These words with particular untranslatable salience included *okagesamade* and *kimochi*, along with some technical terms (like names of dance props) and terms of endearment or respect (for family members and teachers). For assistance with *okagesamade* and *kimochi*, I thank Thomas P. Kasulis (personal communication, December 2, 2013).

14 The etymology of the word conveys this sense of respect and We-ness in addition to having some specifically *Jōdo Shinshū* Buddhist implications. *De* means “because of,” and *o* and *sama* are honorifics. The root of the word, *kage*, means “shadow” or “reflected image” – something that exists because of something else and is thus dependent on that other thing. *Kage* is involved in expressions of indebtedness, favor, grace, support, patronage, or backing; it points back to the source of the benefit that one enjoys. In a seeming contradiction, *kage* can also mean light, but light of a particular kind: moonlight, which is actually the light of the sun reflected back at you. In the context of Obon, *okagesamade* is an expression that anything one is is because of three things: the fundamental interdependence of all things, the lives of one’s ancestors, and the vow of Amida Buddha. Reverend Chijun Yakumo, whose writing on *okagesamade* is cited here, was a minister at Seattle Buddhist Church from 1969 to 1977.
kind of gratitude, the Bon Odori dancer’s gestures are a performative expression of the orientation of *okagesamade* she dances to cultivate. As a moral and ethical mode of being-in-the-world, this orientation of *okagesamade* unites remembering and re-membering to understand the self as always already connected to others.\(^1\)

When detailing what she looks for when selecting dance instructors, Gwen explained that “they have to have that *kimochi* – they have to have that *feeling.*” *Kimochi* in this context is an understanding of and respect for the spirit of Bon Odori and an orientation of *okagesamade*. “To have that *kimochi*” (the word itself literally translating as “holding *ki,*” or vital force) thus implies an appreciation of intersubjectivity within the expressive practice of Bon Odori dancing. *Kimochi* and *okagesamade* infuse the motions of instructors and long-time practitioners, inviting participants to cultivate these orientations as they copy the gestures of the leaders’ affective models.

**Curatorial and creative moves**

How do the curatorial moves of festival organizers, especially Gwen, shape and enable the experience of cultivation? If there are an ethics of participation, what are the ethics of aesthetics in Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori? The process through which dancers move toward an orientation of *okagesamade* and dance with history is not separate from content, and Gwen’s approach to content (her selection of dances and

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\(^1\) As Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro points out, the idea of “betweenness” (*aidagara*) is built into the meaning of the Japanese word for human being (*ningen*), which translates literally as “between person and person” (qtd. in Yuasa [1977] 1987, 23). Yuasa agrees with this inherent intersubjectivity of personhood, arguing (as summarized by Kasulis) that “right from the start, the individual and the social are intermeshed, just as are the mind and body” (Yuasa [1977] 1987, 32). The concepts of *okagesamade* differs from Turnerian *communitas* (1982; 1987) in that it reflects an interdependence that transcends an inside-outside distinction. *Communitas* has an implication of group and not-group, whereas *okagesamade* challenges that dividing line.
music, choreographic additions and alterations, and strategic programming) does more than express her personal artistic preferences. Indeed, her choices reflect a careful balance of accessibility and inclusion of a contemporary community on the one hand, with a strong sense of rootedness in her personal history and the broader history of a Japanese-American community in the Pacific Northwest on the other. Gwen and other leaders dance with history in the present, mindful of the implications of their steps for an event they love.

Michelle Wibbelsman has pointed to the dichotomy of continuity and change as one of those relationships “often perceived as paradoxes, that surface persistently in ethnographic examples of contemporary…public celebrations” (2009, 49). In fact, both Gwen and dance participants themselves respond to this idea of old versus new, “traditional” versus “modern” by creating a third space that disrupts that dichotomy. Bon Odori is about taking the old and making it new, taking the new and making it old, “becom[ing] something new yet familiar.” Gwen’s curatorial decisions are not ends in themselves, but choices that make room for – create the frame for – the ideal expressive and ethico-moral outcomes of the event, which involve the creative agency of its participants.

Gwen, like her predecessors, draws dances from the folk dance repertoires of various Japanese prefectures to represent the diversity in terms of provenance of Seattle’s Issei generation. Some dances and some choreographies are included from year to year not only because they are popular, but because these are staples that have been part of the repertoire since Bon Odori’s early days in Seattle (these include especially “Sōran Bushi,” “Tankō Bushi,” and “Gōshū Ondo”). “Mi Kokoro,” a dance honoring Jōdo
Shinshū founder Shinran Shonin, always opens the festival, serving as a reminder of the religious (or at least, ethico-moral) frame of the undertaking of dancing together. Other dances are rotated from year to year, returning like old friends, and a few new ones are included as well so that participants are always learning and always “coming home.”

Gwen’s choices are made in the service of perpetuating and (re)creating what she refers to as “Seattle style.” Gwen is faced with the same challenge as her mentors before her, namely, how to balance her expertise as a trained dancer with public accessibility of the dancing she leads at Bon Odori, since this accessibility is critical to the success of the event. In terms of musical selection, the perennial favorites are always performed to the same recordings, digitized and looped versions of scratchy records or, according to lore, tape-recorded music overheard in an elevator in Japan by a temple member in the 1960s. The power of these recordings as objects of memory is particularly strong – so much so that the plan to have live musicians perform “Tankō Bushi” in 2013 fell through because doing so did not have the same feeling as using the beloved recording. The mystique of origins of these recordings and the “indexical evidence of [their] circulation and use” (in the form of crackling, popping, and distortion) is part of what makes the core dance standards so compelling; their inner time is literally audible (Hilderbrand 2009, 15; see also Keil 1984 on Bon Odori as “live-and-mediated,” Porcello 1998, and Sterne 2003). New dances, whether adapted from other temples or newly choreographed, might use recently composed Japanese folk music (e.g. “Kawachi Otoko Bushi,” or the

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16 Explaining what he calls an “aesthetic of access,” Hilderbrand writes: “Technical faults [in various media are] indexical evidence of use and duration through time. Here the technology becomes a text, and such recordings become historical records of audiences’ interactions with the media objects, whether through use[…]or reproduction[…]. The altered look and sound of a [duplicated] text through its reduced resolution present both a trade-off for our ability to engage with it and indexical evidence of its circulation and use” (2009, 15).
compositions of Reverend Koran Okahashi from Osaka Betsuin), but Gwen draws a line at using American pop as a soundtrack for dancing. Gwen finds a different way to “draw people in…who aren’t odoriko, who aren’t dancers” rather than turning to hits by Lady Gaga and Michael Jackson as is a current trend at some California temples. She simplifies and shortens gestural cycles to make dancing more doable, and, within the realm of safety and unlike her predecessors, allows participants to embellish their own experience choreographically.

Creative interaction with performance itself happens musically and choreographically. The odaiko player, charged with providing an orienting pulse for dancers, adds his or her own flourishes, moving the musical experience from one of a pre-recorded object into the realm of dynamic performance. A fruitful area for further investigation would be the individual approaches to odaiko accompaniment in Bon Odori performance. Dancers participate in this process of musical supplementation as well, singing hayashi-kotoba (“words of encouragement” that serve as group refrains) and kakegoe (punctuating non-lexical calls and shouts inserted at the ends of lines, such as asore, hai, yoisho, yoi yoi, or za). These responses are included in the recordings and reproduced by participants. In the opening lines of the classic dance “Gōshū Ondo,” the soloist tells those who listen, “I ask for your…kakegoe,” and everyone in 2013 responds

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17 At San Fernando’s 2010 Bon Odori, for example, participants performed to Lady Gaga’s “Just Dance.” See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9m07wahliho (last accessed March 20, 2014). An experiment in Seattle Buddhist Church’s 2013 Bon Odori was the inclusion of a version of the “Electric Slide” as one of the dances. Gwen chose to include this line dance as a way of involving even more people, and it was taught like any other dance in practice to those for whom it was not familiar. To make the “Electric Slide” Bon Odori appropriate, Gwen explained, she added a tenugui (cotton towel) as a prop and searched for several months to find music to accompany the steps. What she settled on was the Yoshida Brothers’ “Overland Blues” (2008), which blends shamisen, blues slide guitar, strings, and in festival performance, odaiko accompaniment.

18 See Hughes 2008 p. 365 for further discussion of these terms.
along with the singers in the recording. These embellishments, though scripted, are not explicitly taught to participants in Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori as the dance steps are (with the exception of the call-and-response section of “Fukushima Ondo”). Instead, one learns how to respond as one participates in Bon Odori over time.

Enthusiastic delivery of hayashi-kotoba and kakegoe performs (cultural) competence and demonstrates engagement that would have been expected and appreciated by Gwen’s predecessors.

In terms of choreographic modification, it is the most popular dances – which also happen to be some of the oldest – that invite the most creative (re)interpretation by dancers. Some dances are more appealing and more appropriate to play with; for example, no one modifies “Mi Kokoro” because of its religious significance and the solemnity that accompanies it following the temple service.\(^\text{19}\) The closing dance of the evening, “Gōshū Ondo,” is one that people seem to particularly relish adding their own flourishes to. A close analysis of a filmed performance of this dance at the 2013 White River Buddhist Temple Bon Odori shows how this dance draws in virtually everyone in attendance to participate in his or her own way.\(^\text{20}\)

The camera, positioned in the center of the circle, stays still so that various dancers enter the frame, move across it, and exit. The opening shot shows the empty chairs and bleachers in the background as people excitedly line up to dance. The music starts, and the dancers begin, some confident in the simple motions of this dance, others

\(^{19}\) There are both verbal and nonverbal cues that establish a religious frame for “Mi Kokoro,” including the staging and timing of the dance as growing out of the post-service procession from the temple, the incorporation of the gasshō gesture in the choreography, and the brief explanation of the dance given by the announcer on the yagura.

\(^{20}\) This video, filmed by temple president Denis K. Asato, is available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDIvOXiumD8 (last accessed April 2, 2014).
getting the hang of it by watching the instructors in the center. The sequence – each gesture corresponding with the punctuation of wood blocks in the scratchy recording – goes as follows: left hand to forehead as right extends out, right hand to forehead as left extends out, palms up facing the outside of the circle, palms down facing the outside of the circle, turn and clap. One of the White River instructors – a confident dancer in her 20s – dances into the frame, performing a dance variation using one sensu. She moves through the sequence with the fan open, snapping it closed when the other dancers put their hands palms down, and snapping it open again right before everyone else claps. An older instructor from the temple and two teenage dancers (a boy in a happi coat and a girl in yukata) try to learn the fan variation from her by watching, with different degrees of success. Using the sensu in “Gōshū Ondo” is, paradoxically, a way of making the old new by making it old again; when Gwen was young, the dance used to be performed with two fans, though the current version without them is much more accessible as a closing dance.

A few minutes into the video, a youth group from Seattle Buddhist Church, led by Ron Hamakawa, enters the frame. Some of them are enthusiastic in their performance of a popular modification: inserting a vertical jump, sometimes with a spin, right before the clap. Some younger dancers take things one step further, exchanging the odori arms for a gesture perhaps evoking a hip hop or urban popular dance vocabulary. At the beginning of their sequence, fingers point high with one arm extended as the other is sharply bent at the elbow, knees bent so that the body’s center of gravity is closer to the ground. In the outer circle, two your girls invent their own interpretation of the clap, turning to one another to do a double high-five in time with the music.
Toward the end of the dance, Gwen and two of her friends from her nihon buyo cohort perform the “correct” choreography of “Gōshū Ondo” so that those watching can follow along. Their experience of the dance, however, is not so serious so that they cannot share brief break to share a word and a smile. When the music stops, one of the dance leaders hugs the little girl who has been dancing next to her, following along. There is audible disappointment from the crowd that the night is over – the seven minutes of “Gōshū Ondo” having passed too quickly – which quickly turns into choruses of goodbyes.

**Conclusion**

One of Yuasa’s key points – one that could all too easily be overlooked in his analysis of examples of “high” art and religious mastery – is that anyone has the potential to engage in a project of cultivation. Anyone can achieve at least a “glimpse of this dimension” in which mind and body are integrated through cultivation, or in the case of Bon Odori, in which the fundamental interdependence of self, others, and world in appreciated (Yuasa [1977] 1987, 200). Though it has its formulae for bodily motion, Bon Odori is intentionally curated to be accessible, creating a space in which “all the moves are right” when done with right intention (Denn 1991). Though there are expert practitioners, a lineage of instruction, and “correct” movements, ultimately participation in Bon Odori is about participation, not about being an expert. As Kodani explains, “the idea of Bon Odori is to just dance…[It] cannot remain alive and vibrant if people cannot come ‘sono mama – just as they are,’ join the circle, and dance” (1999, 13).

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21 Bon Odori mirrors the accessibility characteristic of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism itself – the easy path of the nembutsu.
Saturday, July 20  

Seattle Buddhist Church Bon Odori Festival

I make my way out of the hondo (the temple hall) and down the front steps, following the line of instructors in their matching pale green kimonos featuring a lavender and gold design. With Revs. Castro and Warrick at the front of the procession, we move from hondo to street, where we form a circle for the first dance. Even though there are not many people dancing yet – and certainly very few (if any) unpracticed participants of this opening piece – there is no question in my mind that I will dance “Mi Kokoro.” I know the dance, have had its importance as a dance for Shinran explained to me by more than one of my interlocutors, and have already felt in rehearsal a taste of the respect and grateful presence people now bring to this performance. I step carefully, bringing my palms together in gasshō as I first turn inward to the center of the circle and then face outward toward the rings of spectators here on this sunny afternoon.

A few hours ago, Seiko dressed me in a navy blue yukata with a large chrysanthemum pattern traced in white. As she tied the red obi she had chosen for me, she laughed, recalling how her grandmother would do the same for her when she was little. The 10-year-old Seiko would take a deep breath before the obi was tied and then, once her grandmother had finished and moved on, let it out, gaining a bit more breathing room for the dancing ahead. “She would always wonder later,” Seiko told me, “how the obi had become so loose!”

Now, after the opening dance, I am excited by the several more hours of dancing I have ahead of me. There are some strategic reasons – my participation is a way to ensure continued rapport in my fieldwork, and dancing well is one of few ways I have of expressing gratitude toward those who have taught and helped me in this project so far. I also want to dance for pure enjoyment, relishing the flow and the feeling of “getting it” in some of my favorites like “Dai Tōkyō Ondo” and “Hanagasa Ondo.” But I also experience another feeling, one of responsibility. I have the responsibility to dance “Mi Kokoro” because I understand the beginnings, at least, of what it means. I have the responsibility to dance “Mottainai” and “Kawachi” because I learned them well in practice, and these new dances are not familiar to those here who didn’t attend rehearsals. I have the responsibility to do my part in keeping “Sakura Ondo” going when the music cuts out for a few moments. I am not an instructor and I am not dancing in the center of the circle. But I have learned the dances and therefore have a role in this; as Reverend Kodani writes, Bon Odori doesn’t happen unless people participate, since “it is not [something] meant to be watched, it is meant to be danced” (1999, 13). Since we all rely on each other to remind ourselves of the steps, I want to be correct in my movements so as to be helpful (as I am in “Mottainai”) rather than confusing (as I am in “Sōran Bushi”) to my neighbors.

The sun sets, and we do the last several dances for today in the twilight of a warm Seattle summer evening. Colorful paper lanterns glow overhead, and we don the flashing rings and bracelets for “Hanabi Ondo,” the fireworks dance. The dance instructors have threaded tiny lights through the bows of their obi. But the light we’re all taken with is coming from the almost full moon, high enough in the sky that you can see it near the eaves of the temple, bright as any lantern.
Together young and old gather on Main Street,
Queens and pirates circle round and round,
Dancing in the heat...

Saturday, July 27  White River Buddhist Temple Bon Odori Festival

The weather is perfect today, so a good number of people have turned out for the “Japanese Folk Dance” (as the sign facing busy Auburn Way announces) at White River Buddhist Temple. Since it’s sunny and in the mid-70s, Mt. Rainier is visible in the distance and takes on a pinkish glow as dusk descends. The Pacific Northwest’s Mt. Fuji is a calm presence as a backdrop for the kimono- and yukata-clad dancers making their way into the circle.

My dancing goal for the evening is to get “Hanabi Ondo” right. I remember the quirks of this dance that I usually forget: that you clap five times at the end of the movement cycle rather than the typical four time pattern used in other dances, that some of the motions of this dance are (atypically) asymmetrical in that they are not repeated on both sides of the body, that my left hand and right foot move forward together in one sequence that has eluded me for this whole summer.

After I meet my goal, I duck out of the circle to find another Bon Odori attendee to do a quick informal interview with, as I’ve been doing throughout the evening. Like many of the people I’ve spoken to so far today, the woman I find is here with family members. As she tells me that she has been attending the Seattle Bon Odori since age 12 and the White River one for the past five or six years, we hear the familiar strains of the fishermen’s dance begin. She tells me it’s her favorite dance, before explaining how much she enjoys the festival because of the cultural and generational diversity of its participants and because of the attitude of welcoming inclusion here. Neither of us can resist the pull of “Sōran Bushi” much longer, though, so we quickly wrap up our conversation in favor of joining in the dance.

The gestures in “Sōran Bushi” a work song from Hokkaido, depict the casting of large fishing nets and the hauling in of a big catch of herring. As we all turn toward the center of the circle to face one another and lean in, some people call out the responses along with the singers in the scratchy recording: A dokkoisho, dokkoisho (heave-ho)! As one of the Seattle dance instructors told me, you have to pull in the net together otherwise you’ll lose the catch, jeopardizing your community’s sustenance for the upcoming year. That feeling of group effort, of collective doing, grows stronger as we pantomime pulling in one, two, three times. This is my favorite moment, I think, in all the dancing: the participation of many to achieve something together, the gathering in of this moment to be inclusive of the diversity of those who participate in it.
Saturday, August 3  Tacoma Buddhist Temple Bon Odori Festival

Around 8:30 pm, the exchange students from Tacoma Community College bound into the cleared street, ready to perform their rendition of “Sōran Bushi.” As previous cohorts have done before them, this group of students from Tacoma’s sister city, Kitakyushu, has prepared a sympathetic-knee-pain-inducing version of the Hokkaido fisherman’s dance. Satoshi, one of the students, explains to me that this version of the dance is commonly learned in Japanese schools and is quite popular in festivals. But, he said, he forgot the choreography and needed to relearn it for the Tacoma Bon Odori, so the past four days’ rehearsals have been taxing on his legs! Satoshi and his friends form a shoulder-to-shoulder circle for a quick group cheer, then organize themselves into two lines facing the temple and their enthusiastic audience. There’s a moment’s delay while the music is cued up, and then, with the first notes of the shamisen, the dance begins. The opening is dramatic, each dancer jumping into a wide stance, looking down at the ground as one hand and then the next mimics the motion of rolling waves. This wave gesture bookends the dance, which has a theatricality and athleticism matched only by the taiko groups playing today. The students depict the hard labor of rolling up nets, casting them out and heaving them in, hauling and tossing the catch, and running to and fro to the fast-paced, heavily synthesized musical accompaniment. “Hai, hai!” and “Dokkoisho!,” they shout. Though their choreography would be impossible in kimono or yukata, their breathlessness at the end of their performance is perhaps closer to the actual level of effort of the fishermen we all reference in “Sōran Bushi.” The audience meets the dramatic conclusion of the dance with applause and whistles, cementing for yet another year the popularity of this Tacoma tradition. Unfortunately, since the evening’s festivities are running slightly behind schedule, there’s an announcement that the participatory group “Sōran Bushi” would be skipped. I’m sure I’m not the only one to feel disappointment in spite of the energized performance I’d just applauded.

Introduction

Though these two versions of “Sōran Bushi” share a text and thematic references, their unique gesture vocabularies, musical accompaniments, and ways of relating to the dance space and others in it effect very different things. Making participation a possibility for all ages, bodies, and abilities is one issue that compels the performance of

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1 Video of the Seattle version of “Sōran Bushi” at the 2013 White River Bon Odori can be accessed here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLOzmlGSjAE (last accessed April 7, 2014). A 2011 performance by the Tacoma Community College exchange students may be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzlKVGwnBV4 (last accessed April 7, 2014). David Hughes (2000) has written about the many musical manifestations of the “Sōran Bushi” folk song in contemporary Japan, examining everything from “preservation society” unaccompanied singing, to quotations of “Sōran Bushi” in enka, to versions of the song with jazz or rock instrumentation.
the Seattle Buddhist Church version in the festival setting. Beyond pure accessibility, Fukuko Nakatani’s legacy speaks through the choreography, “Sōran Bushi” being one of the few of her dances still in the Seattle repertoire (which Gwen will not replace, and which, in fact, she restored to the original after some choreographic modifications by Kiki). Performing Nakatani’s choreography honors the influence of her artistry and the Issei generation she represents. And performing a fishing song choreographed by a first-generation immigrant casts back participants’ memories to the labor and sacrifices of the Issei, some of whom were employed in fishing and canning industries along the Pacific coast prior to World War II. The dancers engaging in remembering the past in this way are simultaneously involved in re-membering the community of the present, as embodied in the collective labor of “Sōran Bushi.” Facing the center of the circle to pull in the catch with everyone in sync is a powerful experience.

Acknowledging this centripetal force, this chapter will move outward from chapter 2’s focus on the body of the individual dancer to consider the kinds of work being done by bodies moving together in the space of community festival. The Seattle choreography for “Sōran Bushi” embodies the process of “re-membering” (Casey 2000; wa Thion’o 2009), or cohering, a community whose demographics are shifting and whose identity is actively (re)negotiated in performance sites like Bon Odori. By not engaging in feats of athleticism and thus encouraging participation, it is also an inclusive gesture toward the increasingly diversifying audience for this annual event. Commemoration in Bon Odori is not only about remembering those who have gone before you, but re-membering the community of the present. It is about dancing with history to re-collect a sense of “We” today.
In her study of ritual in Otavalo, Ecuador, Michelle Wibbelsman discusses two relationships, “often perceived as paradoxes, that surface persistently in ethnographic examples of contemporary…public celebrations” (2009, 49). One has to do with continuity and change, which has already been addressed in chapter 2’s discussion of curatorial and creative moves that disrupt an easy dichotomy by creating a third space. The second potential paradox is the “simultaneous celebration of unity and production of diversity in festive rituals,” which Wibbelsman argues are in fact “inherently connected” rather than mutually exclusive (49). Bon Odori in the Pacific Northwest represents a similarly complex case: a space in which meaning is contingent, issues of participation and authenticity become messy, boundaries blur, and frames overlap. Here, unity and diversity dance with one another as festival attendees and participants situate themselves in the dance circle or at its periphery.

The larger issues addressed in this chapter are not somehow new in the context of Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church. In the present, our memories of the past are necessarily consolidated. But as chapter 1 illustrated, Bon Odori has always been a site for the negotiation and performance of identity, questions of culture, race, ethnicity, religion, family and community circling the yagura along with the dancers themselves. The necessarily complicated present offers challenges to be navigated and embraced, successes and failures, and the co-presence of multiple meanings. How does a “‘We’ in vivid presence” come to be (Schütz 1951, 79)? What redefinitions of the boundaries of inclusion must be drawn in order to “re-member” community? How does Bon Odori in 2013 and beyond fit in with ongoing dialogues of multiculturalism and race in the city
and region? What are the politics of culture and (self)-representation that are involved in becoming “something new yet familiar”?

This chapter will address some of these ideas, albeit in a preliminary way given the limitations of both space and scope of my field research. Opening these avenues of discussion is, however, worthwhile since it gets to the “why” of this event – what is at stake in it, and what meaning(s) arise and circulate in its practice. I will begin by discussing the idea of “re-membering” as it appears in the work of Casey (2000) and wa Thiong’o (2009). I will then tease apart some of the major frames existing in internal relationship in Bon Odori, considering the event as a “doing” of culture, a (re)negotiation of race and ethnicity, a performance of ritual, an engagement in play and sociability, and as a festival and spectacle. Johnson (2008) has considered the use of Okinawan Eisā dance in multiple contexts: in Bon Odori as a religious event, in secular artist competitions, and in staged tourist events. But my approach to analysis here, though informed by Johnson’s readings of these three different sites of performance, is to examine the multiple performances occurring in a single site. The “polyphonic” nature (Guss 2000, 12, after Bakhtin) of Seattle’s Bon Odori privileges multivocality (Turner 1972) and intercontextuality (Bloome et al. 2009; see also Briggs and Bauman 1992), resisting reductive impulses to characterize the experiencing of it as solely religious, cultural, social, or touristic.

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2 The idea of frame was introduced by Gregory Bateson in “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” ([1955] 1972) and developed by Erving Goffman (1974) and Richard Bauman (1975) in performance studies. A frame is established metacommunicatively by social actors engaged in interaction, determining the rules for interpreting that interaction.
Re-membering

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s concept of “re-membering” is relevant to Bon Odori, at least as practiced in the Pacific Northwest. Wa Thiong’o speaks of the historical (and continuing) role of the writer in a Pan-African “quest for wholeness,” explaining that “creative imagination is one of the greatest of remembering practices” (2009, 28).

Beyond a passive recall of the past, creative written expression in this vein can effect a re-membering, an active reconstruction of a shared past and a cohering of community in the present. Wa Thiong’o’s aim is to elucidate the tensions between European and African languages and their respective roles in social memory; at the heart of his point is the issue of the colonization of memory and its verbal transmission. Thus, he argues, “language is the means of memory, or, following Walter Benjamin, it is the medium of memory” (29).

But as the example of Bon Odori makes clear, language is not the sole medium of memory. Here, participatory community dance constitutes embodied processes of remembering (addressed in chapter 2) and re-membering (addressed here). Through performative engagement with the past, participants recall personal and collective histories from the last century. The community is re-membered each year as community ties are (re)inscribed given changing demographics and preferred modes of aesthetic expression. In Bon Odori, one dances with history in a dynamic interaction, one in which there is both “a closure and an opening to a new relationship of being” in the present (wa Thiong’o 2009, 43). Thus, the (re)performing of embodied knowledge in Bon Odori
every summer becomes a strategic act, one about claiming identity and claiming a space in which to dance.3

Edward Casey has also offered the idea of “re-membering” as the thing at stake in commemoration. As a commemorative act, Bon Odori dancing calls upon us not as separate beings but as always already intertwined...[It] creates new forms of sociality, new modes of interconnection: between past and present, self and other, one group and another, one form of thinking or acting or speaking and another, one sex and another, one art form and another...Commemorating constitut[es] a shared identity more lasting and more significant than would be possible in an uncommemorated existence. (2000, 250-251)

Thus memory becomes something with a power beyond the subjective consciousness. “We cannot dissociate the past from our present self identity[,] such remembering brings about this identity” – and we cannot dissociate the remembering of our collective past from our present collective identity. “We are what we remember ourselves to be” – and we are what we re-member ourselves to be (290).

Doing culture

The significance of Bon Odori for some is as a Japanese-American cultural event, not (or not only) a religious one. One of my interlocutors, a self-identified Christian Sansei said that for her, Bon Odori has always been “a cultural thing,” and that she had only realized in detail what the religious significance of the event was a few years ago.

Casting it as a dynamic response to and framing of human experience, Aaron Fox (2004) explains that “‘culture’ consists of both ideas and practices, and especially the process of calibrating ideas and practice in expressive discourses” (33, emphasis added).

3 As Ann Cooper Albright puts it in a case study of contemporary African-American dance, “the act of going back to take up again – returning, reclaiming, repossessing” – is a strategy of connecting oneself to and embodying a history that links the personal with the communal (1997, 155).
“Culture” as a noun has historically carried with it implications of reification, determinism, and stasis. Though my interlocutors sometimes referred to Japanese-American culture as an entity (and sometimes one that could be lost), their experiencing and understanding of its operation and use in community life was far more Foxian. Expressive cultural practices in Bon Odori (as illustrated by chapter 2’s discussion of Gwen’s curation of the experience of dance and music) are annual opportunities for (re)calibration – of aesthetics, of community membership criteria and expectations, of relationship to history, of identity – as culture is “done,” or performed, in a way relevant to the community it engenders.

In a 2000 article on embodied ethnography, Aaron Turner convincingly argues along these lines, explaining how communities engage in “doing culture” (57) and in this process (re)constitute and (re)define – indeed, re-member – themselves. He points to the need for a change in the approach of those engaged in ethnographic research “from seeing participants as unproblematic members of a society or culture to examining the methods by which society is constantly remade as a possibility against its own inconsistencies” (59). When dancers fall into sync in “Sōran Bushi,” they gather in an idea of who they are both as individuals and as a group. As Meryl Tsukiji commented, You know, the quote-unquote ‘Japanese community’ – it doesn’t really exist anymore. After the war, a lot of parents gave their kids American names, encouraged them to be more American, tried to refrain from passing on too much ‘Japanese’ because they wanted them to fit in. So as that passed, a lot of just at-home things didn’t get done. The cultural center does these mochi classes where people can go and learn how to make mochi. And I was thinking, you know, if we need to have a cultural center teach children how to make mochi, we don’t have that kind of culture anymore because it’s not taking place in the house. So is culture the things you do, or the meaning that you take from what you do? It’s kind of both, right? Having grandma and grandpa help make mochi versus going
Bon Odori as an enduring form has enough flexibility in what constitutes its exact contents to maintain significance as a site for negotiating what culture is and what it can mean to Japanese Americans in the Pacific Northwest today. Culture, according to Turner, “only exists and persists in the form in which it is lived and…this form is itself constituted in ongoing intersubjective interaction” (Turner 2000, 53).

(Re)negotiating race and ethnicity

According to King-O’Riain (2006), race was the major criteria through which Japanese Americans experienced themselves as a minority group in larger American society both pre- and immediately post-war, and it has again become salient as community demographics shift and younger generations become increasingly characterized as “mixed-race.” In Seattle, the pre-war Japanese and Japanese-American enclave of Nihonmachi (Japantown) was disrupted by incarceration during the war and would not return to its former geographic coherence. The families that returned post-war were more dispersed through the region, and marrying outside of the Japanese-American community became more common in the ensuing decades. The effects of these demographic changes on the Seattle Buddhist Church Sangha came up in a 2006 Seattle Times profile of Bon Odori:

Fifty years ago…the [Seattle Buddhist Church] had a membership of 1,000 to 1,200, nearly all of Japanese ancestry. Over the years…that group intermarried with other ethnic groups. And the Japanese Americans, who once had the Chinatown International District as the core for their businesses and associations,
began dispersing. Now...temple membership is down to 580...more than half of the children in the Sunday-school program are of mixed ancestry. “We have half-Japanese, half Chinese; half-Japanese, half-Filipino,” [Reverend Castro] said. “I’ve met blond-haired, blue-eyed children with a Japanese name.” (Lacitis 2006)

The idea of a Japanese-American community is one that, à la Turner, must “be constantly remade as a possibility against its own inconsistencies” as the early pre-war conflation of race, ethnicity, and culture is challenged (2000, 59). As a dancing with one’s family history and genealogy, participating in Bon Odori’s expressive cultural performance becomes a powerful moment for performing and (re)negotiating what festival organizers called “Japaneseness.”

Citing a friend’s informal survey of the Japanese and Japanese-American student population at the University of Washington, Gwen Kawabata Florence and Ron Hamakawa (the 2013 festival chairperson) made a case for Bon Odori as key locus for personal and collective re-memberings:

GKF: Some of those kids were only an eighth or a sixteenth Japanese. And overall...they said the one thing during the whole year that puts them closer to their Japanese roots is Obon in Seattle.
RH: Regardless of if they’re Buddhist or not.
GKF: Yes. It’s the one thing that made them feel more Japanese about themselves, even if they were only a sixteenth. So that to me [makes it] worth doing what we’re doing, because it brings these kids closer to their roots.5

In spite of the (vestigial) racialized or genetic language (being “only an eighth or a sixteenth”) that is still in use, “feeling more Japanese about [oneself]” depends more on one’s affective connection with a diasporic past, the real and imagined histories of Bon

5 Gwen Kawabata Florence and Ron Hamakawa, interview with author, Seattle Buddhist Church, August 14, 2013.
Odori in Seattle and Japan, and one’s willingness and competence in engaging in curated expressive cultural performance.

One group of individuals for whom this process is formalized is the annual Court of the Japanese Queen Scholarship Organization of Washington (JQSOW). Examining this institution in particular is helpful in understanding how cultural competency vis-à-vis race and ethnicity is understood, experienced, and even manufactured today. Since 1960, the JQSOW (formerly the Seattle Japanese Community Queen Pageant) has sponsored an annual competition that selects a Japanese Community Queen and several princesses. These women participate in events throughout the year both locally and in sister cities in California, Hawaii, and Japan, serving as ambassadors and representatives of the Pacific Northwest Japanese-American community. Besides being between the ages of 18 and 24 and currently enrolled in school, those who wished to participate in the 2013 competition had to be “of at least one-quarter Japanese ancestry,” according to program guidelines.⁶

The duties of the members of the Queen’s Court include attending dance rehearsals and the Bon Odori festivals at Seattle Buddhist Church and Tacoma Buddhist Temple, and their moves (choreographed and unchoreographed) through these spaces illustrate how “race, ethnicity, culture and gender get linked together in social practice” (King-O’Riain 2006, 36). For some members of the Court, this was their first time participating in Bon Odori, and the others had attended perhaps a few times when much younger. Even as they wore crowns and sashes marking them as representatives of

⁶Rebecca King-O’Riain uses the JQSOW as one of her case studies in *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants* (2006). In the context of a pageant, the assumption that race equals cultural competency is challenged by mixed-race candidates, though the “race work” (as King-O’Riain calls the active social construction of race as a salient identity category) they and pageant organizers do ultimately reinforces this assumed relationship rather than dismantling it (75).
contemporary Japanese-American identity, the women were quite literally learning the steps to a new dance. Meryl Tsukiji, who provided dance coaching during competition and in Bon Odori practices, reflected on this dynamic:

[The issue of the JQSOW competition] is very interesting. There was a time when the Japanese community was very small after the war, and as people became acclimated, they moved out into other areas, so there isn’t as the same kind of geographic location for the community. Events will bring people in, but everybody doesn’t live and work and patronize the same places, although they might run into each other at times. So it’s turning out that the scholarship program is having people come in who’d like to learn about their community. They’re actually representing their community, but that community is having to kind of introduce them to [itself]. […] It’s changed quite a bit [over the years]. The ladies are always accomplished and very dedicated, but they’re not always very familiar with the community, so a lot of the things that they do is for the first time. Their first time putting on a yukata for practice, first time learning a Japanese dance, first time dressing in kimono…

Bon Odori practices that culminate in the successful display of skill in the festival itself is a microcosm of what the women achieve over the course of their tenure as members of the Court. Instead of the JQSOW competition as a performance of ethnic and cultural competence from the outset, the process becomes a learning opportunity for participants and a re-membering opportunity for community identity negotiation.

Each participant in Bon Odori engages in an act of personal re-membering to negotiate his or her own positionality in the event as a collective experience, whether

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7 Though I did not have to learn how to carry myself in full kimono, I was alongside the Queen’s Court during much of Bon Odori rehearsal. My proximity to them in age and our shared sense of the experience of quickly yet comprehensively learning something new fostered an immediate alliance. Allying myself somewhat with the members of the Queen’s Court was a strategic move on my part not only from a purely technical perspective (in that I was able to watch as they received extra coaching and fine-tuning of their dancing), but also in that it gave my interlocutors a familiar category in which to place me. I was a student learning by doing, not an academic on the sidelines with my notebook and camera (though I did carry these with me). Because of my proximity to the Court and because it would most easily explain my interest in Bon Odori, several of my interlocutors assumed I was of Japanese heritage (“I thought you might be quarter,” or, “Who is your grandmother?”) and thus engaging in a project of personal re-membering of cultural and ethnic identity similar to the members of the Queen’s Court.
religiously, ethnically, culturally, and/or socially inflected. Seattle television journalist and Asian-American community leader Lori Matsukawa offered the following reflection along these lines:

My family tries to make it to Bon Odori every year. It was important when our son was growing up that he be exposed to Japanese cultural activities. We believe everyone needs to learn about their cultural roots. Also, it’s a great way to visit with friends and support the Buddhist temples. I like the Seattle festival because it’s large and diverse. I like the White River festival because it’s more intimate. This year, we also attended the Tacoma festival. […] The only other Obon festivals I’ve attended were as a child in Wahiawa, Hawaii. I went to those mostly to be with friends […] I participate in Obon as a cultural event. I was raised a Christian, like my father. My mother was raised a Buddhist. She explained the religious significance of Obon to us, but saw no conflict in Christian children participating in a Buddhist event that had evolved over time into a distinctly Japanese celebration. She had my sisters and me blessed by a Shinto priest when we were babies, not because we were Shinto, but because that’s what Japanese families did. Our family celebrates Oshogatsu with traditional Japanese foods and Shinto decorations. We pay our respects with incense at Buddhist funeral services. This mélange of practices was seen by our family as “Japanese” in nature rather than “religious.” Over the years, it has become more important to me to participate in Obon because it’s the one time a year when I can enjoy folk dancing that’s fun and easy. And I do find myself thinking about those who have passed on and reflecting on their impact on my life.9

Performing ritual

Bracketing the idea of secular rituals that occur in Bon Odori (such as those involved in dressing in kimono or yukata, preparing food, or claiming a spot for one’s family at the edge of the dance circle), what are the cues that make Bon Odori’s religious frame apparent? The event is situated within the larger period of Obon, which, as already

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8 As Casey writes, “what in the individual is divisive and diasporadic (thanks to the effects of succession in time) becomes, in and through the perdurance realized by ritual, consolidating (in oneself) and conterminous (with others)” (2000, 228).

9 Lori Matsukawa, email to author, August 6, 2013. Among Matsukawa’s community contributions are her leadership in founding the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Washington in 2003 and her service as president of that organization for several years.
mentioned, comprises a number of events. But there are signs and moments embedded in Bon Odori itself that indicate religious significance. These cues call attention to the religious subject positions of those who identify as Buddhist and draw on-Buddhist participants’ attention to the event’s larger meaning as an opportunity for personal ethico-moral cultivation (see chapter 2’s discussion of okagesamade). Not all Bon Odori participants choose to attend the short pre-dancing temple service, though no one can avoid hearing the ringing of the large Bonshō bell ten times to signal its beginning.¹⁰ The service itself, though short, included sutra chanting, chanting the “Juseige” (“Three Sacred Vows”), oshoko (incense offering) by dance leaders, and a short Dharma Talk on the themes of Bon Odori and Obon by one of the ministers. Following the service, a procession of dance leaders and ministers moves from hondo to street, lining up for the religiously keyed “Mi Kokoro” dance (which includes gasshō bows in its choreography).

This ritualized opening of Bon Odori is the same at the White River and Tacoma Buddhist Temples. Tacoma has had a special closing ritual, a memorial candle garden, for the past six years. Candles in memory of deceased relatives and friends are lit following the last dance of the evening, bookending the festival with an opportunity for

¹⁰ The Bonshō is a several-foot-high metal bell housed in a shōrō, or bell tower, across the street from Seattle Buddhist Church in the temple’s Wisteria Park. A large statue of Shinran Shonin stands nearby. Seattle Buddhist Church is one of a few BCA temples to have a Bonshō, and Reverend Castro has changed the practice of its ringing to integrate it more fully into Sunday services and special occasions. According to Shin Buddhist ritual, the Bonshō is rung before the smaller Kansho (a bell in the temple that signals the entrance of the ministers and their assistants to the naijin, or inner altar area). However, according to an explanation in the March 2003 temple newsletter: “The Seattle Betsuin method, which is ‘reverse from standard,’ is being done intentionally. […] When the Bonshō was rung before the Kansho, the only people who heard the Bonshō were the ‘latecomers’ who hurriedly ran past the Bonshō bell and into the Hondo. The people in the Hondo paid no attention to the Bonshō, and kept pace with their conversation. A few years ago, the order was reversed so that the Kansho rang first, then the Service chairperson opened the service with the request to be mindful of the Bonshō (about to be rung) and sit in quiet meditation. That is the genesis of the ‘Seattle Betsuin way of the Bells.’” (Source: http://www.seattlebetsuin.com/asknamo.htm)
Engaging in play and sociability

Play is an additional frame created and experienced by participants in Bon Odori. Though there is a lot at stake in an event that is as much about culture, ethnicity, race, and ritual, the celebratory nature of Bon Odori’s commemoration means that there is room for sociability and fun. As in the case of ritual discussed above, there are communicative and metacommunicative moments that invoke the play frame, signaling, à la Bateson, “this is play” (1972, 189). Bateson argues that play is not defined by certain actions, but rather that actions are play if they are framed as play (1979, 153).

For some, especially those who are not dancers during the rest of the year, Bon Odori as “time out of time” may be enough of a departure from the everyday to constitute a playful break. The props used in the dancing could be read as objects of play – especially those that are non-utilitarian such as the flashing lights and cherry blossom branches (as opposed to the fans and tenugui that have potential use-value outside expressive cultural performance). For each generation of participants, Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church has been a place to see and be seen, to meet with old friends and to make new ones. Sociability is facilitated by the celebratory atmosphere and by the larger understanding of the event as a time to remember the past and re-member the
present. Both older and younger dancers spoke of Bon Odori as a chance to flirt with a crush, find romance, or admire from a distance. As Satoru Ichikawa summarized, “I think [Bon Odori] is just an expression of joy at being with people, you know, being out there with others.”

Because of Bon Odori’s commemorative nature, play is not the Bakhtinian carnivalesque (1941), and the closest to antistructure and inversion (Turner 1987; 1982) in Bon Odori occurs in the beer garden behind temple. In this parallel world that has replaced the tea garden and nihon buyo stage of Fukuko Nakatani’s days, local jazz musician Deems Tsutakawa performs several sets throughout the evening. In 2012, a group also performed a “crash dance,” which was so popular that they returned in 2013 to perform and lead social and line dancing. A few dancers might cross between street (with its Bon Odori dancing) and beer garden (with everything from line dancing to Beyoncé to a “Latin and Swing Mix”), but for his part, “flash dance” organizer Curtis Luke doesn’t find Bon Odori dances interesting because they seem static. A Chinese American who attended Bon Odori with his friends while growing up, Curtis prefers to make his own opportunity to express what the festival means to him and enable others to engage in participatory dancing that feels more “innovative.”

Innovation can and does occur within Bon Odori dancing, however. There is a specific type of play performed by Bon Odori participants who identify as Japanese American or Japanese American and Buddhist that constitutes a kind of insider play – play that does work (see Turner 1982) as opposed to lacking any additional purpose or

11 Satoru “Sat” Ichikawa, interview with author, Seattle Buddhist Church, July 21, 2013.
12 Tsutakawa’s website is http://deemsmusic.com/ (last accessed March 20, 2014).
outcome beyond itself. Moments of bounded choreographic reinterpretation or modification were discussed in chapter 2 as opportunities for creative cultivation of ethical personhood in line with the ethico-moral project of Bon Odori, taking “Gōshū Ondo” modification (e.g. jumping, spinning, modified arm position, high-fives, etc.) as a case study. These same moves may be read as play that makes a claim to insider status. Bon Odori’s message is one of inclusion and openness, yet there are hierarchies of claim-making in this space. This is an area in which further investigation is needed, but some preliminary observations about who engages in choreographic play, how, and what that means for Bon Odori’s processes of re-membering will be shared here.

What is play (or playful), what is permissible, and who plays depends on the individual participant’s subject position. Those who are neither Japanese American nor Buddhist and do not have a long personal history with Bon Odori are less likely to engage in intentional choreographic modification as an indication of respect, unless sharing in choreographic play modeled by a friend who has a cultural, ethnic, or religious claim to the event. For those with such a claim, not playing might indicate a religiously inflected social position or a concern with right motion as right be-ing, as in the case of the young kimono-clad girls who studiously follow the instructors in the inner circle of dancers. Choosing not to play might also be a demonstration of a high level of dance training and a responsibility as a choreographic exemplar, as in the case of Gwen and her nihon buyo cohort.

But choreographic play can perform insider status as strongly as following choreography to the letter. Here, the ludic nature of individual performance is “intrinsically connected with the ‘work’ of the collectivity [through the] manipulating
[of] symbolic objects” (here, choreographic gestures) (1982, 32). The Japanese-American Buddhist youth group teens performing modifications to “Gōshū Ondo” are an example of this (see the video example discussed in chapter 2). Through the insertion of jumps and changes in arm position, they claim an intimate familiarity with and position in Bon Odori that allows them to introduce change as an opportunity for self-expression that still fits within the parameters that govern the space. For another group of Japanese Americans who have this same claim on Bon Odori, modification is additionally a display of artistic competence or training. In the popular dance “Tankō Bushi,” members of various regional taiko groups perform a side-to-side footwork embellishment at the point in the dance when everyone pantomimes digging for coal, an alteration drawn from the movement vocabulary of group taiko performance. Thus, choreographic play is artful and fun even as it is simultaneously a strategic claim of a Japanese-American and/or Buddhist identity – a performance of cultural competence, of a personal and genealogical history of connection with Bon Odori, and a dance within the boundaries of permitted choreographic alteration.

Insider play is therefore not transgressive. It is compatible with (rather than rupturing) other frames of ritual and cultural performance, and it does not impinge on others’ experiences of the event as they choose to position themselves in it. Processes of play are processes by which actors negotiate their relationship to the event and their place in it, expressing investment in Bon Odori dancing by modifying it to make it a self-expressive act. Playing demonstrates what Brian Edmiston calls an “authoring self” crafting an “ethical identity” in relation to others (2007, 81). Dancing the play frame is not merely tolerated deviation from accepted practice. Instead, such movements represent
their performers’ artful claiming of particular identities and articulating of the relationship between the individual and the collective – a re-membering through playful motion.

*Participating in festival, consuming spectacle*

Festival is a uniquely expressive cultural process that accomplishes more than escapism and revelry for participants. Although advertised as a festival, Bon Odori does not have some of the carnivalesque features some might associate with that label, such as inversion, masking, antistructure, suspension, eccentricity, and sacrilege (Bakhtin 1941; Turner 1987). It does, however, fall under the rubric of festival in other ways. Guss (2000) describes how communities constantly and actively negotiate the “interplay of political, economic, and historical forces” through festival and other expressive practices (6). Cultural performances are “sites of social action” rather than “simply mirrors, for if they reflect, they also create” new senses of identity and reality (12, 171). Indeed, in the case of Bon Odori, the same festival form can have shifting meanings given festival’s “polyphonic” nature (12). As has already been described, Bon Odori makes for a powerful example of expressive, collective remembering in order to reflect on and reframe community in the present. The Turnerian time out of time effected in Obon paradoxically causes one to experience time radically *in* time – a heightened state of awareness of the present’s connection to the past as participants dance with it. History is, after all, “primarily about the contemporary social relations of those who tell it” (Guss 2000, 25). As discussed above, the festival space is also one for engaging with questions of culture, race and ethnicity, ritual, play, and sociability. Festivals are thus not only
dynamic “cultural forms about culture” (Guss, citing Bauman) that facilitate the doing of culture in tactical, strategic, and political ways, but also opportunities for negotiating these other aspects of individual and collective identity.

Moving beyond the significance of the event for the temple community and for Japanese Americans in the region, however, it is critical to understand how Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church is situated within a larger city festival called Seafair. A quintessential part of Seattle summer since its beginnings in 1950 as a celebration for tourists and for locals of a nearly 100-year-old Seattle as the “boating capitol of the world,” Seafair comprises annual summer-long series of neighborhood and citywide celebrations, from parades to hydroplane races.\textsuperscript{14} In addition to a regular program of Seafair standards, approximately thirty additional events are selected and promoted by Seafair organizers as part of the Seafair Sanctioned Community Events Program. This program includes many events with an ethnic or cultural focus, such as the Seafair Pow Wow, the Hispanic Seafair Festival, Pista sa Nayon (representing the Filipino community), and UmojaFest African American Heritage Festival. Bon Odori is also a Seafair Sanctioned Community Event and has been since 1950, making it one of the oldest of these affiliated events that are, in the words of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “the safe and appropriate place to be different, to be ‘ethnic’” (1998, 242). Seafair also has a scholarship pageant, in which different geographically, culturally, or ethnically defined communities may enter contestants. The JQSOW Queen serves as the representative of the Japanese community of Seattle in the Miss Seafair competition, and

\textsuperscript{14} A brief history of Seafair can be found at the organization’s website: http://www.seafair.com/subcontent.aspx?SecID=910 (last accessed April 7, 2014).
all of the participants in the competition attend “Seafair Sunday” at Bon Odori on their circuit of appearances. The Seafair pirates (another long-standing festival tradition) and some Seafair officials also make an appearance as ambassadors. In 2013, as in years prior, the pirates were guided by dance leaders as they participated in (or tried to participate in) “Mi Kokoro” – an interesting choice given that piece’s role in framing Bon Odori as a religious ritual for some.

Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori as a Seafair event raises questions about the politics of culture and representation in a city-sanctioned project of multiculturalism. Though my fieldwork did not find as complicated a relationship between the two institutions as I had initially expected, it is still productive to consider the potential and peril of turning an inherently participatory endeavor into a presentational one. The Seafair affiliation has increased the visibility of Bon Odori to the Seattle public, though this was a continuation of a historical trend growing out of Bon Odori’s inclusion in the prewar Seattle Golden Potlatch and strengthened by the event’s coincidence with (and inclusion in) the 1962 World’s Fair (see chapter 1). The tension between event as display of exotic “Other” and as self-expressive practice was perhaps more apparent in these events than now with the Seafair affiliation (the Seattle Buddhist Church receiving support, publicity, and recognition from Seafair, but having most if not all of the agency in the relationship).

Patterns of public understanding, however, modeled in popular press vary from nuanced understanding of the significance of the festival to encouraging the consumption of festival in a sort of at home cultural tourism. In an example of the latter, complexities and histories of race, ethnicity, and culture are all collapsed to impose an external
monolithic concept of cultural authenticity on what is a multivocal expressive practice.

According to Guss, communities may strategically invoke ideas of authenticity and tradition as intentional acts of self-definition (see also Spivak 1987). However, these labels can also do other work: Guss describes them as acting, in some cases, as rhetorical “coconspirators in ensuring that the socially constructed and contingent nature of festive practice will continue to be misrecognized” (15). *The Seattle Times* promoted the 2010 Bon Odori and Seafair Pow Wow with an emphasis on drums, dance, and brightly colored costume:

> If anybody in your house whines “There’s nothing to dooooo,” print this article, fold it into a paper airplane and throw it at them. It’s festival season. Among the highlights:  
> *Seafair Indian Days Pow Wow* celebrates its 25th year. Head for Seattle’s Discovery Park and follow the drumbeats until you glimpse colorful dance regalia through the trees.  
> *Seattle Bon Odori*, a Japanese Buddhist festival honoring the dead and celebrating life, adds more colorful regalia and taiko drums to the weekend. While you’re there, find serenity through ikebana. (“Pow wow, Bon Odori and Much More”)

According to Lori Matsukawa, Bon Odori’s affiliation with Seafair has little bearing on the popularity of [the event] here. The Japanese American community would continue to support it with or without the affiliation. I think Seafair benefits more from the relationship, because Obon helps create a more culturally diverse celebration, reflecting the different communities of Seattle. It gives Seafair a reason to celebrate cultures, Sister Cities, and Pacific Rim history.\(^\text{15}\)

> The presentation of Bon Odori as something “traditional,” “authentic,” and marked “ethnic” or “cultural” within a Seafair project of multiculturalism is an interesting point for further discussion. Lisa Lowe has written about the 1990 Los Angeles Festival

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\(^{15}\) Echoing Matsukawa’s sentiment, a Seafair Board member spoke briefly during a break in the dancing at the 2013 festival, saying: “Every summer at Seafair we like to celebrate the cultural diversity and the richness in that diversity in Seattle. We’ve been proud of our sponsorship with Bon Odori – or rather our partnership with Bon Odori – for quite some time.”
of the Arts in this vein, critiquing the 550 performances it comprises as threatening to level and generalize [meaning] to a common denominator whose significance was the exotic, colorful advertisement” of the city (1996, 417-18). In her analysis, narratives of authenticity, genealogy, and heterogeneity demonstrate those aspects of multiculturalism that support rather than subvert the hegemony masked by the celebratory rhetoric of the festival organizers. 16 Are these narratives dominant voices in the experience of Bon Odori as a Seafair event?

Multiculturalism as both a philosophical ideal and as a civic agenda (particularly from the 1990s on) has been subject to much debate (e.g. Davis 1996; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Lipsitz 1996; Lowe 1996; Mason 2007; Mills 2007; Taylor, 1994; Watson 2000). In theory, multiculturalism as a repudiation of monoculturalist hegemony seems self-evidently positive. But as Charles W. Mills (2007) argues, at its worst, multiculturalism rests on a problematic conflation of race and culture, manufacturing a non-existent one-to-one relationship between the two terms in discourse, minimizing the internal diversity of groups, and denying real histories of racial oppression. “Semantic substitutionism” of culture for race works in popular discourse because of comfort with a celebratory and “eminently legitimate” concept of culture (94). 17 And even that concept of culture can be problematic if it is an essentialist one, prone to clear demarcations,

16 A narrative of authenticity “stressed the role of the city as ‘curator’ whose task was the salvaging and protection of pure cultural objects threatened with extinction in their native lands” (415). A genealogical narrative capitalized on an invented “continuity of ‘global’ and ‘local’ cultures” (416). A narrative of heterogeneity privileged the dehistoricized juxtaposition of radically different performances, thus “leveling the nonequivalent statuses of each particular form, genre, and cultural location (417). These three narratives were rarely countered by oppositional narratives that highlighted inequality by “attaching, when possible, the object to some cultural context of production and reception, thereby making the history of the object explicit” (418).

17 Even using ethnicity as “a respectable way of talking about human difference” (101-102) becomes problematic, as this move – part of the multiculturalist’s rubric of culture – is also effectively an erasure of the social and political realities of “racialized history” (102).
internal homogeneity and stasis, and rhetoric of authenticity and corruption (Mason 2007). Even when awareness and tolerance of difference is a product of multiculturalist processes, “the way in which [this has been achieved] is in effect by exoticizing [ethnic minorities] and hence perpetuating stereotypes of difference and, ipso facto, inferiority” (Watson 2000, 52-53).

Even as they critique “soft multiculturalism” or “difference multiculturalism” that is essentializing in its tokenistic engagement with diversity “diluted into an easy celebration of difference,” some find utility in what anthropologist Terence Turner (1994) has termed “critical multiculturalism.” This is perhaps a more hopeful stance, reimagining multiculturalist discourse as a space with room to include consideration of power dynamics, histories of oppression, race, gender, and religion. Instead of multiculturalist narratives that “let us off the hook,” a transformative multiculturalism might be opted for that addresses systemic inequalities rather than masking them (Lowe 1996, 421). As Turner explains it, the goal of critical multiculturalism is “to use cultural diversity as a basis of challenging, revising and relativizing basic notions and principles common to dominant and minority cultures alike, so as to construct a more vital, open, and democratic common culture” (qtd. in Watson 2000, 54). Andrew Mason (2007) does recognize some utility in a (redefined) culture concept, saying that if by culture we often mean a shared way of life, we need only realize that “way of life” is vague and inclusive

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18 Watson continues: “The phrase frequently used to describe this exoticization is ‘steel-bands, saris and samosas,’ picking up on three of the colourful signifiers of ethnic otherness. It is, claim the critics, these visible and tangible phenomena which are seized upon time and time again in schools as markers of cultural identity, and by failing to explore the deeper realities of ethnic minority experience schools trivialize other cultures, rendering them entertaining but superficial and peripheral. This reduction of ethnic minorities to a limited set of cultural traits is subsequently further endorsed by the media and becomes firmly ensconced in the national mentality, to the point where knowledge of the other is confined to dismissive referential images” (2000, 53).
of internal diversity as well as change. This way, multiculturalism need not be essentializing, and its “politics of recognition” (Taylor 1994) can be understood as active and processual. In addition, I would argue, “politics of recognition” involves more than one kind of recognizer – not just only state and institutions, but communities recognizing one another and individuals recognizing one another. The lived experience of a critical multiculturalist approach could be a powerful one, and it is here where ethnography is useful and needed.

In the case of Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori and Seafair, a balance seems to have been struck, with histories and meanings embedded in the experience of the event both explicitly and implicitly. Anyone who engages in the dances experiences an embodied relationship to history whether they are aware of its details or not; anyone who listens to the lyrics of “Seattle Omoide” hears the reference to “Sensei Kiki” dancing nearby; anyone who attends the pre-dancing service or pauses to talk to Reverend Castro or a Ministers’ Assistant about Shin Buddhism will be made aware of the Buddhist history and significance of the practice; anyone who steps into the gym to look at art displays will also be met with displays about incarceration and the sacrifices of temple leaders and members during the war. One might even meet Satoru “Sat” Ichikawa there, as I did, and see the letter his father, Reverend Ichikawa, wrote to Sat and his siblings while they were separated during the war. He might talk about his gratitude for the sacrifices of the nearly 100 Nisei veterans from the temple he honors by maintaining a commemorative photo display “because we owe an awful lot to the veterans of World War II – those who fought for us and helped us to come out of the camps and become American citizens, you know, again.” So there are opportunities for those who attend and
who participate to become oriented to histories and politics of race, culture, religion, and difference. In this way, Seattle Buddhist Church itself offers the “critical” complement to Seafair’s (perhaps) “soft multiculturalism.” What individuals choose to take away from the experience ultimately depends on their particular subjectivities and their modes of engagement.

Two primary modes of engagement are available to people at Bon Odori: watching and dancing. There are non-Japanese Americans and non-temple members who attend the event – maybe because of a Seafair connection, or because they heard about it from a friend, or because they have attended Bon Odori festivals in Hawaii or California, or because they have created their own tradition of attendance. According to a multiculturalist critique, there is a danger that these “outsiders” might reproduce a “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990) in their watching and ubiquitous photography. Citing Barry Troyna’s realization that multiculturalism emphasizes “the expressive features of ethnic minority cultures” thus creating “voyeuristic imperatives,” Angela Davis reflects:

Multiculturalism has acquired a quality akin to spectacle. The metaphor that has displaced the melting pot is the salad. A salad consisting of many ingredients is colorful and beautiful, and it is to be consumed by someone. Who consumes multiculturalism is the question begging to be asked. (1996, 45).

Jane Desmond engages with this question in her examination of the Hawaiian luau as a staged event for tourists (1999). The commodification and consumption of “bodies on display,” she argues, leaves reified identity categories (“preexisting categories of social difference…anchored in physical difference,” 253) unquestioned as they are perpetuated.

Perhaps for some the Seafair frame encourages a “tourist gaze,” especially given the fluidity between the vastly different types of events that comprise Seafair summer.
But Bon Odori itself offers an alternate possibility through the second major mode of engagement for “outsiders”: dancing. In her suggestions for how the tourist experience might be modified to turn multicultural encounter into engagement by undercutting the “physical foundationalism” (understanding the racialized body as the marker of “authentic” expressive cultural performance) promoted by simply watching, Desmond argues that “the physical co-presence of tourist and of resident” might enable new forms of understanding (261). Indeed, in Bon Odori this is certainly the case, as by dancing with others and their histories participants tune in to some of the embodied processes of remembering and re-membering at play in ways that resonate with their own experiences.

Highlighting the need for further ethnographic work, Desmond points to the importance of understanding how outsiders “interpret their own experience […] and] the varieties of meaning that [they] make” in the process of interacting with expressive cultural events (258). My preliminary efforts to do so yielded a range of experiences, from individuals who attended practices to learn the dances, to those who attend every year mainly to watch, to those approaching the event in a primarily social way. It seemed that for the most part, there was a level of understanding of the significance of Bon Odori as an opportunity to express gratitude, experience communitas (Turner 1982; 1987), see familiar faces, or learn something new, even if all of the intricacies and details of its history and practice were not entirely foregrounded. A white woman in her late 60s or early 70s sitting in a chair watching the dancing at Seattle Buddhist Church’s Bon Odori on July 21, 2013 explained, “I love the celebration. I like the idea of the honoring of the ancestors, and I like Seattle’s cultural diversity – and this is part of it.” She stumbled upon Bon Odori two decades ago while on her way to the International District and now
comes every year. After expressing admiration for their spirited dance moves on “Gōshū Ondo,” I talked with a group of 21-year-olds (who identified themselves as of Chinese, Lao, and Vietnamese descent) whose Japanese-American friend had encouraged them to come to Bon Odori because “you get to dance, you get to see a different side of a culture that you’re not used to. Overall, it’s just a great experience.” “Seattle is a multicultured city,” a Seafair pirate explained in a moment of earnestness amidst the levity of his performance, “and this is just one of many, many wonderful festivals – we hit ‘em all.”

At the Tacoma Buddhist Temple Bon Odori, a twenty-something self-identified African-American cosplayer and some of his friends were watching me dance “Kawachi,” trying to get the movements from my example. Chatting afterward on our way to get props for the next dance, he expressed his interest in the event as a social and cultural one but also as an inclusive one: “You get to be a part of their tradition.”

George Lipsitz (1996) has emphasized the importance of investigating the particular positionalities of individual agents in negotiating their engagement with and consumption of constructed and curated cultural products or representations. Appreciating both “the promise and peril of intercultural dialogue,” Lipsitz demonstrates the utility of examining moments of intercultural miscommunication as products of particular orientations to and framings of experiences (405):

People may know a lot even if they don’t know the history of the literature they like or the names of the notes they play and hear, and that their imperfections as consumers of intercultural communication do not necessarily render them oblivious to effects of power or to the resonances of hate, hurt, and fear in the cultural creations they enjoy. People are more curious, ingenious, and more intersubjective than their roles as consumers and citizens acknowledge or allow. Consequently, they often fashion fused subjectivities that incorporate diverse messages about who they are. Often, they make mistakes and they distort what they see and hear. Sometimes they do violence to others by stealing stories and
appropriating ideas. But they also display a remarkable ability to find or invent the cultural symbols that they need. It is important to document the harm done by uncomprehending appropriations of cultural creations, to face squarely the consequences of mistakes in the reception, representation, and reproduction of cultural images, sounds, and ideas. But the biggest mistake of all would be to underestimate how creatively people struggle, how hard they work, and how much they find out about things that people in power never intended them to know. (411-412)

As an example of such a miscommunication, a middle-aged white man there with his adult daughters spoke to me about how “the intent” of Bon Odori resonated with him. While his confused explanation involving death, ancestors, children, and reincarnation may not have been entirely accurate, his takeaway from the experience was spot on: “The dancing is joy! […] If you accept at face value what they say it is, you’ll understand – a celebration of joy.”

As an examination of the cultural, racial and ethnic, ritual, and social framings of Bon Odori have already shown, complexity in individual response is hardly limited to the experience of the “outsider.” Embedded in the dynamics of festival celebration are also the tactical and strategic negotiations of identity as the performers themselves engage in the politics of their own self-representation. Even so, inclusion and participation are cherished elements of the event, diversity a reality that has come to be an important part of what makes Seattle’s event meaningful according to Gwen and Ron:

RH: I think regardless of if we have people who are exchange students from Japan, or who come up from Hawaii and stay for the summer, or who are visiting from California, or B.C., or wherever, it’s like there’s something kind of comforting – you may not know the dances exactly, but the music? Generally, yeah, it sounds like Bon Odori music. I could probably get teriyaki. I could probably get kori. There is something I think that is very comforting and homecoming-ish about the whole deal.

19 As Kodani explains, “Obon…is known as Kangi-e or the Gathering of Joy, meaning the Joy in the Dharma or Joy in the Truth of Life and Death. It is thus a gathering of joy which embraces all things, living and dead – a memorial service of joy” (1999, 9).
GKF: And the thing that was really interesting is last year there was a Black brother and sister, an African American brother and sister, who went to Garfield High School, grew up here, and came [to Bon Odori] during the late 50s and into the mid 60s. I remember them coming and dancing here...I see the brother occasionally, but I haven’t seen the sister in probably 25 years. Well, she showed up here last year and she just smiled at me, and I thought “Oh my god!” I mean, she’s older than I am and I hadn’t seen her in all those years. “I had to come back,” she said. “I came back from L.A. – I dance down there but I miss it here.” And so she came back up here...I don’t know what their names are, but I could spot them up the street and they just laughed at me and said, “I haven’t seen you in a long time.” It’s like homecoming – these kids come back.

**Conclusion**

The multiplicity, co-occurrence, and “porousness” of the frames invoked during Bon Odori at Seattle Buddhist Church is, ultimately, what makes the event meaningful (Guss 2000, 9). In this “spangled tapestry,” many forms of meaning making are possible depending on the particular subjectivities of those who involve themselves in the event (Turner 1987, 89). According to Meryl, event organizers are tasked with not overly determining meaning, but rather giving people the parameters within which they can craft their own:

Festival dancing is meant [for people] to show up and jump in and have a good time. That having been said, Gwen holds practices to give people the chance to know what they’re doing and enjoy what they’re doing when the time comes. So one of the underlying questions [is]: What are people really learning, and how do you balance? I guess it depends on how important it is to shape the meaning of what people are doing for them. It’s delicate, because if you shape the meaning too much then there are too many people that will be excluded because they can’t relate. And if you don’t shape it enough, then people do things without really knowing what they’re doing. And maybe in the end, what becomes most important is that a lot of different people can take something from what they do. Maybe most important is the ability to know there is a place that you can come to and feel at home – feel like it’s just okay whatever you do and how you do it.

The many affordances of embodied co-presence converge in the dance space, multiple frames engendering multiple meanings that exist in what Kasulis calls “holographic
relation,” in which the whole is reflected in each of its parts (2011, 26). A particular frame might crystallize in a moment when a certain identity has particular importance – in the chanting during the pre-dancing temple service, in the readjustment of a child’s obi, in the appearance of the Queen’s Court on the yagura to greet the crowd – before refraction once more.

“Identity,” Simon Frith writes, “is not a thing but a process – an experiential process which is most vividly grasped as music” or as expressive culture more broadly writ (1996, 110, emphasis in the original). A dokkoisho, dokkoisho! In “Sōran Bushi” as in the other dances, unity and diversity, coherence and complexity, past and present dance with one another, as the assemblage of individual participants re-members itself again.
Conclusion

The sun goes down on the lanterns, they sway along,
I watch children as they learn new songs,
The future carries on...

Two little girls, not more than six years old, run into the circle forming in the gym waving kachi-kachi as they excitedly prepare themselves to rehearse “Seattle Omoide.” A week later at Bon Odori, perhaps those same girls – one now wearing a red kimono with an elaborately tied obi and one in a pretty pink dress – walk hand-in-hand down the street toward the yagura in the afternoon sun. Once the dancing starts, children move next to adults, inserting their own spontaneous bodily expressions of joy into their efforts to mimic the choreography they see performed around them. A mother dances with her young son in front of her, helping him move his arms so he can learn the patterns. A line of elementary and middle school-aged girls in the inner circle dance past me, earnestly trying to emulate the graceful motions of the instructor they follow like ducklings.

The epigraphs used throughout this thesis are drawn from the lyrics of “Seattle Omoide,” a song and dance composed in 2007 to honor the 75th anniversary of Bon Odori in Seattle. This effort, spearheaded by Gwen, Ron, and the current generation of festival leaders represents a strategic act to commemorate the practice’s local history, to craft a place in the repertoire for the (re)telling from year to year of what “Seattle style” Obon means. This conclusion will briefly consider “Seattle Omoide” as emblematic of the processes of remembering and re-membering embodied in Bon Odori’s participatory dancing. This song and dance “take[s] the old and make[s] it new” through lyrical contributions from multiple generations that capture favorite memories and moments from decades of festival. ¹ “Seattle Omoide” takes the new and makes it old by traditionalizing a contemporary composition (through choices in instrumentation and

¹ As mentioned in chapter 2, this phrase comes from the chorus of “Mottainai,” one of 2013’s new dances.
gesture vocabulary) to invoke heritage, connecting present and past practice. Finally, the piece represents an invitation to the next generation of leaders and practitioners to carry Bon Odori forward, as the final stanza of lyrics (reproduced as the epigraph for this conclusion) suggests.

The music for “Seattle Omoide” was written by local composer Byron Au Young in consultation with festival organizers and members of the Regional Taiko Group (a consortium of area ensembles). Gwen choreographed the dance, engaging in her typically collaborative process of incorporating suggestions from her team of dance leaders after repeated working rehearsals of the new piece. The result of over a month of creative work was a song with verses in English and a chorus in Japanese with an accompanying dance using kachi-kachi (castanets). The dance itself is exuberant and fun, involving swinging the arms from side to side and punctuating each movement with the sound of the onomatopoeic prop. The kachi-kachi percussion from the circle of dancers interacts with the composed music, performed live at the 2013 Seattle Bon Odori with fue (flute), chu-daiko (medium-sized drum), shime-daiko (high-pitched smaller flat drum with heads tightened with rope), and various hand percussion instruments. The ensemble leader and a drummer kept time with wood blocks and odaiko, respectively. A recording of the piece was also made the year it was composed, and that recording is used in rehearsals and performances if a live ensemble is not available. The recorded version includes shamisen and a female vocalist in addition to chu-daiko, shime-daiko, and kachi-kachi (which interject at the point the lyrics reference them), and fue, with the expectation

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2 Au Young’s website is http://hearbyron.com/ (last accessed March 20, 2014).
that a live vocalist and *odaiko* accompaniment would be added in performance.\(^3\)

Compared to the lushly produced and orchestrated soundtracks for some of the other dances, the choice of instrumentation is an intentionally traditionalizing move, positioning this song more squarely in a folk idiom the grandparents and great-grandparents of today’s dancers would recognize. The complete lyrics are reproduced below, with sample placements of *kakegoe* (non-lexical calls and shouts) in parentheses.

The whole piece is looped (on the recording) and repeated (in live performance) so that dancing can continue as long as desired.

Chorus:

_Ji-chan, Ba-chan, odori ni koi, (asore!)_  
_Ta-san, Ka-san, kodomo no koi, (asore!)_  
Shinseki kamawazu minna de koi...

Ahhhh-ah-ah,  
The summertime would be strange without song or dance,  
_Bon Odori makes me feel alive, (hai, hai!)_  
_Shiatoru [Seattle] romance…_

Everyone – _kachi-kachi_ -- all in sync,  
_Colorful _kimono_ fill the street,  
_Taiko keeps the beat…_

[Chorus]

_Ahhhh-ah-ah,  
Together young and old gather on Main Street,  
Queens and pirates circle round and round,  
Dancing in the heat (hai!)…_

[Instrumental break]

_I eat somen and yaki onigiri,  
Every year my fingers get sticky,  
From eating kori (za!)…_

[Chorus]

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\(^3\) The 2013 Seattle Bon Odori version of “Seattle Omoide” with live musical accompaniment may be found here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYEQSKWzU50](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYEQSKWzU50) (last accessed April 7, 2014).  
A performance from the White River Buddhist Temple’s 2011 Bon Odori festival that uses the recorded version of the song with a live vocalist singing along is available here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaZjd18kVo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaZjd18kVo) (last accessed April 7, 2014).
Ahhhh-ah-ah,
I nod to friends and to those who have passed away,
Sensei Kiki dances next to me,
On this happy day…

The sun goes down on the lanterns, they sway along,
I watch children as they learn new songs,
The future carries on…

[Chorus]

These lyrics do a lot of work, simultaneously reaching into the past and into the future as they celebrate the feeling of the present moment. The Japanese chorus exhorts grandpa and grandma, parents and children, family and those not related to come and dance. Bon Odori’s sights and sounds are celebrated, as are its feelings of romance (a time and a place for finding a sweetheart) and communitas (“everyone -- kachi-kachi -- all in sync”).

The event is portrayed as ideally inclusive and entirely local, with references to things like the “queens and pirates” of Seafair (see chapter 3). The embedded reference to “Sensei Kiki” is particularly meaningful: the 75th anniversary of Bon Odori in Seattle for which “Seattle Omoide” was written was also her Hatsubon.

The performance of tradition in Bon Odori is not associated with stasis. The mix of old and new – Fukuko Nakatani’s “Sōran Bushi,” next to “Seattle Omoide” with its reference to Kiki Hagimori, next to the “Electric Slide” danced to shamisen music – is “Seattle style,” is that feeling that ensures intergenerational participation in Bon Odori.

As Casey writes,

[T]he non-swerving of a tradition-based ritual is compatible with modification and innovation within its formal structures. Here, as elsewhere, it is a matter of what Confucius calls “the spirit of the rites.” For what matters in the performance of rites is the manner in which they are conducted. Conduct makes manifest the spirit of ritualized activity which, without this spirit, falls into the emptiness of bare repetition. It also helps to make ritual genuinely perduring, and therewith more readily rememberable and more lastingly memorable. […]n the lastingness achieved by such ritual the past to which tribute is being paid is allowed to
perdure – to last as coming toward us – through the present of the commemorative act and onward into the future as well. (2000, 228-29)

Like Kiki before her, Gwen charges herself with finding dance leaders of a variety of ages who know the spirit of Bon Odori, leaders who “have that *kimochi,*” or feeling of understanding and responsibility. Even as current leaders craft their own vision of the event, they look for “young ones coming up [who will be] able to blossom into this” practice.4

Decisions about leadership are in service of participation as the essential ingredient in Bon Odori. In order for Gwen to craft an event that “bring[s] that feeling back, you know, like we had when we were kids,” she must facilitate accessible dancing that involves excited participants who swing their *kachi-kachi* in sync. Participation means buying into the existentialist and Buddhist project that “I concern others and they concern me” (de Beauvoir [1948] 2000, 72). Bon Odori practices and performances are saturated with the means of maintaining an intersubjective ethic, from sharing in the inner time of a dance to fostering kinesthetic empathy with those dancing nearby. If Kodani is right that “the beauty and significance of life is a ‘be-ing’ not ‘being” (1999, 13), and if, as Lévy-Bruhl states, “to be is to participate” (qtd. in Casey 2000, 312), then the expressive gestures of Bon Odori dancing embody and render visible the interdependence that is a fundamental reality of the human condition.

Bon Odori, Kodani writes, “is not meant to be watched, it is meant to be danced […] by anyone and everyone” (1999, 13; cf. Noyes 2003). Dancing to the music, Bon Odori participants experience be-ing in community with others both past and present,

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4 Gwen Kawabata Florence, interview with author, Seattle Buddhist Church, August 14, 2013.
“becom[ing] something new yet familiar” as they remember, move, and re-member together.
References


