"The Train Ride to the Topaz Camp in Utah."
Drawing by Sachi Fuji Matsumoto, 1942.
Oral History Research, Theory, and Asian American Studies

Alice Yang Murray

As I finish reading another batch of graduate school applications, I can't help but note the stark contrast in people's conceptions of historical research topics. Aspiring cultural theorists sprinkle their essays with terms like discourse, subjectivities, incommensurability, and indeterminacy. Future social historians, on the other hand, emphasize oppression, resistance, agency, and communal solidarity. Very few applicants mention both discourse and community in the same essay. Yet how can I be surprised when so few of us within Asian American Studies who call ourselves cultural theorists or social historians ever talk to each other? Occasionally, we'll even lob accusations at each other: theorists are pretentious elitists who lack any social commitment while social historians are naïve essentialists who fail to acknowledge their lack of objectivity. Most of the time, however, we simply ignore each other, read different articles, attend different conference panels, and almost never cite each other's research.

As an advocate of bridging this scholarly divide, I hope the students I advise won't take as long as I did to explore the benefits of cross-fertilization. I came out of graduate school a staunch social historian dismissive of cultural theorists and their study of "texts" as irrelevant to "real" historical research. They might talk about the process of doing history but I was out actually interviewing Japanese American redress activists about their experiences. While theorists spoke in a jargon few outside of academia could understand, I established relationships with political activ-

Alice Yang Murray is an assistant professor in History at the University of California, Santa Cruz.
ists and participated in a growing number of Japanese American community events.

Ironically, however, it was this very contact with the Japanese American community that forced me to reconsider my assumptions about oral history and the value of postmodern theory. Over the years, as my relationships with activists changed, so did my interview questions and their responses. I became aware that redress activists had multiple and conflicting views of the meaning of the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II and the redress movement. This was not just a matter of comparing accounts among activists. A single individual could present different interpretations of history as the context of the interview changed. I could not help but become aware of how much the larger historical context and the dynamics of each interview affected the oral histories. I wasn't just recording each person's experience. I had a direct impact on how individuals represented their past. Consequently, I realized that I could not simply "tell what happened" during World War II or the redress movement. I also would have to analyze why individuals remembered and recounted the history of these periods to me in particular ways at particular times. Only then did I turn to postmodern theory for insight into the possible factors affecting the construction of these narratives of memory.

Recognizing oral history is a process and not a product makes both research and interpretation much more complicated. When I first began interviewing people in 1990, I never tried to "historicize" the interviews or consider the impact of my "positionality" on the process. In hindsight, however, I can trace how my selection of activists, the questions I developed, and my responses to their comments reflected certain scholarly and political agendas. Like many oral historians then and now, I was committed to "restoring" to history the perspectives of marginalized individuals. I wanted to challenge traditional political scholarship that privileged written sources and ignored the voices of people who experienced race, class, and gender oppression. I hoped to be a pioneer in the burgeoning field of Asian American history. Although my adviser and several faculty members in my graduate program supported this goal, I knew that many historians shared the views of two of my mentors who insisted Asian Americans were not an "important" enough group to study. Becoming a bit self-righteous, I vowed to prove to these well-meaning but poorly informed scholars that Asian American history was "real" history vital to
the understanding of immigration, labor, citizenship, and civil rights.

Determined to study the concrete life experiences of individuals and communities, I assumed, like many social historians, that theory was preoccupied with "texts" and abstract concepts and was thus irrelevant to my research. Unfortunately my initial exposure to postmodern theory only reinforced this belief. The first few articles I tried to read deserved the criticism social historians often levy against theorists. Sentences in these articles never seemed to end or contain a verb other than variations of the verb "to be." The writers appeared to determine the value of a noun by the number of its syllables. Moreover, I couldn't understand why these articles contained so many adjectives, like Foucaultian, Derridean or Lacanian, that referred to theorists without explaining their concepts.

If I actually had read Foucault, instead of just a few individuals who invoked his name, I would not have dismissed all theorists. Instead I convinced myself on the basis of just a few articles that all theory was self-referential tripe that replicated the worst writing practices of the sciences. It was easy to rationalize not spending the time and effort to understand the esoteric terminology. For me, Foucault became a kind of "f" word. The presence of the dreaded "f" word in an article or book made me inclined to skip it.

I thus neglected to consider how theories of power, language, and meaning could affect my own research assumptions and methods. If I had, I might have recognized that my notions of "agency," "resistance," and "solidarity" were oversimplified and romanticized. Dismayed by a tendency in earlier scholarship to depict Asian Americans as "victims" of white oppression, I and many other social historians wanted to document a history of activism and protest against discrimination. Given that there was so little scholarship on Asian Americans at all, it is perhaps not surprising so many of us wanted to promote stories of heroic individuals and communities. Such research not only could counter the common public image of Asian Americans as a "model minority" achieving "success" in America without a history of protest, but might even stimulate more current activism against oppression.

I still believe it was a necessary and logical development in the historiography to spend so much time refuting portrayals of Asian Americans as victims. Yet in our zeal to revise earlier victimization studies, too few of us contemplated alternative ap-
proaches or questions. Even as I questioned the conclusions of the paradigm of victimization, I still allowed it to dictate my research agenda. Instead of dismantling the paradigm, I simply refined it by adding the concept of "resistance." Substituting a homogenized depiction of resisters for a homogenized depiction of victims, I ignored the complexity and diversity of Asian American experiences.

After limiting my research radar to groups struggling against race, class, or gender oppression, it’s no wonder most of my old graduate school papers contained the refrain “. . .but they were not passive or submissive victims.” Given this research focus, a professor suggested I might enjoy an exhibit at the Oakland Museum entitled “Strength and Diversity: Three Generations of Japanese American Women.” I thought a visit to the museum might help me develop a seminar paper on Japanese American redress activism. Instead I found a topic that had preoccupied me for the next ten years and forced me to rethink my assumptions about historical methodology and interpretation.

Initially, however, I had no idea that this research might change my views of postmodern theory and social history. At first, Japanese American redress seemed a clear “social history” subject. The role of racism in the government’s forcible removal and confinement of Japanese Americans during World War II had been well documented. Although there was scholarship on how Japanese Americans responded to the incarceration during the war and a growing list of oral history anthologies and memoirs, there were few accounts of the long-term legacy of internment and almost nothing on the history of redress. In other words, I could still stake my claim that this was both an important and unexplored topic. Moreover, there was obvious appeal to studying a movement that had forced the national government to issue an apology and provide monetary compensation to surviving victims of racism. I could document both a history of oppression and a history of individual agency and communal solidarity triumphing over racial injustice.

I also was attracted to the prospect of talking to real people about their experiences. After a stint doing archival research for another seminar, I was eager for more human interaction. Reading archival material had been fascinating, but I had spent a lot of time wishing I could ask the people mentioned in these written sources how they felt about their experiences. Now I would get a chance to ask such questions of living historical sources.
I found it difficult to contain my excitement as I listened to four participants recount their lives during a museum panel entitled “Day of Remembrance: The Impact of the Detention Experience on Japanese American Women.” One woman moved me to tears. Later I would learn that this was not the first time Kiku Hori Funabiki had spoken publicly about her experience in a World War II detention camp. In 1981 she had testified before a government commission investigating the causes of the incarceration and in 1984 she had lobbied Congress as part of the redress movement that won legislation providing government compensation for surviving detainees in 1988. In all these presentations, Funabiki described the pain of watching her father being taken away in shackles by the FBI after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the forty years of guilt she felt at being imprisoned behind barbed wire. But in 1990 she also wanted the audience to hear how sharing this painful personal history with the public had been cathartic and empowering. Remembering the war helped her to “reach down and purge repressed feelings about that dark chapter” and intensified her commitment to the struggle for redress. After recalling her own evolution from a silent victim to an outspoken critic of racism, Funabiki urged all the women in the audience who had been incarcerated to share their memories with their families, the ethnic community, and the nation.

I doubt if there was a dry eye in the packed auditorium after Funabiki spoke. I could hear people around me sniffling even as I searched in vain for a tissue. As I listened to Funabiki and the other women, I rejoiced at “discovering” a history that needed to be told. I would interview these women and make sure that history recognized and celebrated their experiences. This attitude was not just a testimonial to the power of their inspirational stories. It also reflected my assumption that if they weren’t mentioned in academic scholarship, they needed to be “reclaimed” and presented to the rest of the world. It didn’t occur to me that they might be prominent within the Bay Area Japanese American community or appear often within the pages of the Japanese American press. I also never thought to examine their government testimony or the many stories that appeared about them in the mainstream press before I interviewed them. In retrospect, my attempt to “restore” them to history was ludicrous. Many of these women had been interviewed several times before and had conducted their own oral histories of other Japanese American women to prepare the text for the exhibit I had just viewed.
My ignorance, however, might have protected me from being intimidated by these extremely articulate women. It was difficult for me to listen to recordings of these early interviews without cringing at my obvious lack of knowledge about the community. At the time, I thought the interviews went well because the women gave such eloquent responses. But when I listen to many of these tapes, a common pattern appears: a poorly phrased question yields a half-hour story rich with detail and emotion. I just happened to be lucky that these women could draw on extensive experience speaking to interviewers and to the community about their experiences. They had told their stories before and they could do so again with great polish even if my questions were mundane or awkward. In other words, these oral histories were remarkable despite, rather than because of, me.

These oral histories also demonstrate the impact of changing relationships between ethnographers and informants that anthropologists have analyzed for more than a decade. My unabashed admiration of these women and their desire to educate the public about the injustice of internment and inspire other activists clearly influenced the topics addressed in our oral history interviews. When I first showed up on these women’s doorsteps with fruit basket in hand, I was greeted with varying degrees of appreciation and amusement. One woman thought bringing a present was a “very Nisei” (or second-generation Japanese American) thing to do and was surprised to learn that I had been raised to think of it as a Korean tradition. Most of these interviews, in fact, began long before the tape recorder was turned on as we “chatted” about why I was interested in interviewing them, what historical material I had read, who else I had talked to, and who I planned to approach in the future. Moreover, almost everyone expressed curiosity about how a second-generation Korean American became interested in Japanese American redress. In one case, I spent almost half an hour explaining my own family experiences and views of discrimination, patriarchy, ethnic identity, and history before I got a chance to ask my first question.

These interviews also illustrate how our agendas often converged. While I had designed questions to explore women’s views of racism and sexism, it soon became evident that many of these women also wanted to emphasize the pernicious impact of these two forces on their responses to the incarceration. For example, Kiku Hori Funabiki told me that she never contemplated during the war “the injustice” of what happened or why she and her
mother were put “behind barbed wire with watchtowers and armed guards.” As a child, her parents tried to protect her from a racist society by urging her to “keep a low profile,” “not make waves” and “defer to authority, particularly white authority.” The incarceration only confirmed for her the second-class status of Japanese Americans. Desensitized and lacking a sense of self, she endured camp by “coping through denial.”

But while Funabiki and the other women I interviewed emphasized how much racism and sexism could silence women, they also wanted to convey to me a lesson in how community activism could empower women. After describing how painful it was for her to resurrect buried memories of her father’s suffering during the war, Funabiki recounted how the process of sharing these memories with the public intensified her outrage at the injustice and her commitment to become an activist. Three years later she was shocked when she appeared before a congressional committee and a white male congressman tried to “ambush” her testimony by insinuating her father might have been a security risk during the war because he ran an employment agency. As she recalled sending a letter to be included in the Congressional Record denouncing Congressman Thomas Kindness for trying to undermine her credibility, Funabiki clearly hoped I would learn from her experience:

> We have a right to stand toe to toe with these guys that are looking down on us trying to tell us what our rights are. I just came to realize that we were just being a little too timid about this.

I was, of course, quite eager to help these activists spread their message. I might be a young and naive outsider but I could help the public remember the injustice of the incarceration, the struggle for redress, and the need for vigilance against racism. In recounting their transformation from silent victims to outspoken and successful activists, I might inspire others to emulate them. Consequently, these first oral history interviews and my analysis of their experiences emphasized the suffering caused by the incarceration, the onset of their activism, and their contributions to the passage of redress. It was an incredible history of individual empowerment, communal solidarity, and successful resistance to racism. I knew that I could devote the next several years to researching this history for my dissertation.

I would soon learn, however, that while this history was important, it was hardly complete. As I became friends with these
women, conducted more research, and participated in various communal activities, my understanding of redress activism changed. Whereas earlier I had focused on the battle for redress, I began to learn more about conflicts within the activist community. What I had once thought was a simple story of an ethnic community coming together to win justice from the government became a much more complicated story of different groups fighting to represent the Japanese American community and to define the meaning of the incarceration and redress. Forced to acknowledge these different versions of history, I became aware of how much my relationships with activists affected the interviews I recorded. I also began to re-examine my views of historical memory and the ways historians and activists construct history before various audiences at different times.

I would not have learned as much about this history of factionalism among redress activists if I had not spent time with these women and other activists at community events. The women invited me to activities ranging from meetings of their Women's Concerns Committee and historical society programs to Mother's Day celebrations and picket-line demonstrations against the firing of Asian American female employees. I joined them at these events to learn more about their lives, to meet other members of the community, and to express my appreciation for their support of my research. I also, however, wanted to demonstrate to them that I too cared about community issues. Several recounted stories of researchers who promised to "give back" to the community and then were never seen again. I hoped that participating in an oral history workshop or volunteering my husband to fry fish for a fundraiser might assuage any fears they might have that I only cared about my own research.

But as I spent more time with the women and the line between researcher and friend blurred, I gained new insight into their experiences that changed my research agenda. Whereas my first interviews had focused on the impact of the incarceration and reasons for the success of the redress movement, casual conversations with these new friends exposed me to a history of communal disagreement about redress goals and strategies. In our formal interviews, some of the women had described differences between the three major redress organizations but in very general terms. As I became closer to the women, however, I began to hear a lot of "off the record" comments about problems within organizations, criticism of organizational leaders, and conflicts between organi-
izations. Once they realized I was interested in this factionalism and would not use the information to try to discredit the concept of redress, they began regaling me with personal documents and lists of people within different organizations that illuminated these divisions.

Pursuing this line of investigation exposed me to other issues as well. It was soon apparent that much of the disagreement between redress organizations stemmed from different wartime experiences and different interpretations of the meaning of the incarceration that were shaped by postwar events. I couldn’t understand redress activism without analyzing why people remembered the incarceration experience and legacy in such different ways at different times in their lives. Comparing accounts presented in interviews, government records, organizational newsletters, and ethnic newspapers also indicated that an individual activist or group representative might describe the history of the incarceration and redress in different ways before different audiences. Analyzing these depictions was important not so much to accuse someone of being inconsistent or manipulative but to shed light on how different contexts might affect both memories and representations. Once I became conscious of these various constructions of history, I also became interested in the role of other groups in promoting particular histories of the wartime incarceration and redress. My simple study of the passage of redress legislation developed into an exploration of why different groups of Japanese Americans, government officials, scholars, the media, and museum curators promoted multiple interpretations of the wartime incarceration and the significance of redress.

Understanding how particular contexts could impact memories and representations forced me to re-examine my views of oral history and the relevancy of postmodern theory. I no longer took it for granted that I could discover the “definitive facts” of someone’s life from an interview. Instead I would need to analyze the constructions and interpretations of the past as influenced by the dynamics of our interview and the larger historical context. At the same time, however, I also realized that oral histories were no less “reliable” than other historical sources. All sources, whether newspapers, archival documents, personal letters, or oral histories, should be contextualized. All scholars, Bob Berkhofer notes in a useful analysis of the impact of postmodern theory on historical research and writing, need to examine the “relationships among a text, its author, and the social context of each” and how
a "historian acts as a mediator between a postulated past and an experienced present through the medium of the text." Many critics of oral history sources never consider how often supposedly more "legitimate" archival or newspaper accounts actually rely on oral sources. They almost seem to assume that the act of transmitting oral sources into written form suddenly endows these "texts" with greater credibility.

I, on the other hand, would argue that oral history sources should be used by more researchers because they can reveal a mediation process that can also be analyzed and incorporated into historical interpretation. I wholeheartedly agree with Michael Frisch when he asserts that oral history can be:

a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory—how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.

Oral historians have a special opportunity and responsibility to explore such issues. While researchers looking at archival or newspaper sources may have to guess the context for the creation of their sources, oral historians can design questions to analyze explicitly the creation and representation of particular memories. We can ask people and design questions to see if their views of the past may have changed. We can ask them about events and experiences that might have caused them to remember or forget certain experiences. We can even explore the possible meaning of silences, inconsistencies, revelations, and omissions in a way few archival scholars can even imagine.

The "interactive" and "collaborative" nature of oral history also can be seen as an asset rather than a liability. Anthropologists have made us aware that oral history is a "dialogue" shaped by such factors as the race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, and political identification of both the interviewer and narrator. We need to acknowledge how attitudes, demeanor, personality, expectations, and perceptions of intended audiences can affect research agendas, questions, responses, and interpretations. Yet once we are conscious of these factors, we can also analyze how the evolution of our relationship with our informants affects their presentation of memories. Language choice, tone of voice, facial expression, body gestures, and narrative patterns can provide in-
valuable clues for analyzing the dynamics of the interview and the impact of particular contexts on how people remember and represent the past.

Self-reflexive scholars can and should design questions to shed light on how larger historical contexts and relationships between interviewers and informants might affect the agendas, assumptions, and responses of both parties. For example, after certain newspaper articles and books presented particular explanations of the passage of redress, I decided to ask some of my informants what they thought of these accounts. The immediate response was for some to give credit to the unsung, while others slag mud at the over-celebrated. I also asked them to analyze why they might agree or disagree with these different accounts and whether their attitude had ever or would ever change. I then asked them if they had any strong feelings about the role my book should play in challenging, confirming, or revising these accounts and if those views might affect our discussions.

Of course, there's a danger that preoccupation with the "process" of interviewing can overshadow our analysis of our informants' depictions of the past. I've heard some self-absorbed conference presentations on the dynamics of interviewing that only focus on the interviewer's dilemmas of "representation." Acknowledging our role in the construction of an oral history narrative should not become an excuse for navel-gazing. It should only be the first step in a continuous process of both contextualizing and interpreting our oral history narratives. Obviously intertwined, context and interpretation must be analyzed when we present our research findings.

Based on my experience, I would assert that the real "dilemma" facing oral historians today is the problem of trying to choose from a seemingly inexhaustible supply of sources that might help contextualize our oral history narratives. At one time, I naively thought I could understand the history of redress by interviewing the leaders of the three different redress organizations. As I conducted more and more interviews, however, I realized that there was no "representative" account of one group or even one individual. I also discovered that there was a wealth of written material that could shed light on people's experiences, memories and representations. Anyone dealing with a twentieth-century topic has to face the possibility that there may be an enormous paper trail of sources that runs through government records, newspapers, organizations, courts, archives, and even people's garages. But how much writ-
ten material should we consult before and after we interview people? How many times should we interview a single person? How many people should we interview when we know there are many who can shed light on the subject? Do we sacrifice quantity or quality? In other words, knowing that contextualization needs to be continuous can make it extraordinarily difficult to finally stop conducting research. There will always be another written and oral source one can consider. When is enough finally enough?

Lastly, if we acknowledge that both contextualization and interpretation are intertwined, how do we actually present these elements in our research findings? It's a lot easier to say that both must be included and analyzed than to do it without falling into the trap of navel-gazing. How much space should we devote to acknowledging how much we influenced the creation and interpretation of our sources? The idea of hearing a diary-like account of a historian's research and writing process has little appeal for me even if this provides the best way to contextualize one's historical sources. And if I have no tolerance for this, I can only imagine the derision such presentations would elicit from people within the Asian American community.

As Russell Leong has suggested, there are far too few attempts to “enhance and build linkages among community members, scholars, cultural workers and our youth.” Researchers need to recognize that we are all guilty, to a certain extent, of “academic pimping” because we tend to utilize community sources for our articles and books for our own needs without considering the needs of the community. But if we can never fully repay our debt to the community, we can give something back. We can at least try to revive the spirit of “serving the community” that was so vital to the creation of Asian American Studies. Only then can we challenge the increasingly common perception that academics care only about getting published, receiving tenure, and impressing other elitist colleagues.

Unfortunately, I know a few scholars who merit such criticism. I've heard academics say it doesn't matter if people within the Asian American community are “incapable” of understanding their research. The condescension is palpable and disgusting. I've also, however, heard well-meaning colleagues maintain that sophisticated new research requires the use of precise and complex terminology. I'll admit that “translating” theoretical terms into language non-specialists can understand may entail a loss of meaning and
specificity. But isn't this true of all translations, whether the translation is of a different language or of scientific concepts? I'm sure that many scientists who find the articles in *Scientific American* to be simplistic are still glad that there's a forum where scientific ideas can reach a popular audience. If we really believe in the importance of our research, shouldn't we try to disseminate it as widely as possible? Can't we simultaneously publish the more "precise" scholarship in specialized journals and produce more accessible accounts for community journals, newspapers, and magazines?

As an oral historian, I have a vested interest in trying to improve relations between academics and community people. If the hostility gets much worse, oral historians may find doors slammed in our faces. But I also would argue that even self-proclaimed "theorists" could benefit from spending some time within the community. Ironically many theorists who write about the "politics of representation" miss the chance to explore the implications of their research for living people. I never would have anticipated that my contact with the Japanese American community as a "social historian" might make me more receptive to theory. I suspect that many theorists might also benefit from such cross-fertilization. To give just one possible example, I've heard many theorists discuss the concept of an "Asian American" identity as an essentialist construction necessary for political alliance. Couldn't oral history provide an ideal source to explore and compare how different individuals and groups have interpreted and represented the meaning of this concept not just during the late 1960s and 1970s but throughout the last three decades? Wouldn't such sources help theorists analyze the impact of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and a variety of other factors on constructions and representations of memory, history, language, culture, and politics? In other words, couldn't oral history sources shed light on the multiple and complex contextualizations of language, power, and meaning relevant to both social historians and theorists? And perhaps by asking self-identified social historians, theorists, literary critics, activists, politicians, artists, and others to reflect on why they have categorized their "roles," the meaning of "Asian American," and the meaning of the "community" in particular ways, we can begin to understand and maybe even start to heal the rifts between these groups. Perhaps then we could begin to try to collaborate on mutually beneficial research and community projects.
Notes


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


