


A Theory of Reciting as Asian American Buddhist Practice: The Young Buddhist Editorial as a Discursive Site of Recitation

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This article contributes a theory of reciting as Asian American Buddhist practice. I argue that when Asian American Buddhists share their stories and experiences, they perform a critical form of religious reciting. This reciting articulates the reality of Asian American Buddhist existence amidst ongoing legacies of exclusion. It displaces the predominance of narratives about Asian American Buddhists told by others. Moreover, reciting forges networks of knowledge, recognition, and sangha amongst Asian American Buddhists. This article then investigates the recently established web platform, *The Young Buddhist Editorial* (YBE), as an example of the layered reciting practices amongst young Asian American Buddhists. I examine YBE as a discursive space, both in regard to the platform itself as a publisher of Asian American Buddhist stories, and in regard to its broader impact in reciting these narratives to the public. I further argue that YBE serves as a discursive site of recitation that exemplifies and amplifies Asian American Buddhist existence beyond injury and grievance.

Keywords: Asian American; American Buddhism; race; youth; reciting

Asian-Americans are tired of insisting that others care. The truth is that few are listening. All we can do is to continue to tell our truths, to know, even just for ourselves, that we are here.

—Anne Anlin Cheng, “What This Wave of Anti-Asian Violence Reveals About America.”

We noticed that being Buddhist and being Asian American, our stories are being told for us. . . . One of our big pushes is to have our communities tell our stories.

—Devon Matsumoto, “Online Forum Helps Asian Americans Find Their Way in Americanized Buddhism.”

The Covid-19 wave of overt violence against Asian Americans has suddenly increased the attention paid to Asian Americans. In Buddhist scholarly and practitioner circles, this has resulted in a marked shift in the visibility of Asian American Buddhists in the dominant discourse on American Buddhism.¹ In many ways, this may be a welcome development in a field that

¹ The concept of American Buddhism is a debated and evolving term. Cheah (2011) has noted the historically exclusionary implications of the category to denote white Buddhists. Masatsugu (2008) and Williams (2019) have both demonstrated that for Japanese Americans, American Buddhism involved maneuvering structures of state-sponsored



has been structured by white supremacy and the discursive practice of orientalist racial rearticulation (Cheah 2011: 60). It would be remiss, however, not to heed comparative race scholar, Anne Anlin Cheng's reminder that the recognition of Asian Americans, especially Asian American women, is conditional upon the hypervisibility of their injury (2019, 2021).

Viral videos of Asian Americans being physically attacked and images of desecrated Buddhist temples have provoked a momentary public determination to see that which has always been there. Such limited visibility, however, reveals both how Asian Americans have not registered in the social consciousness as people whose lives have been systematically shaped by white settler supremacy²—“caught,” as Cheng describes, “in a no-win position between whites and Black Americans” (2021)—and a longstanding enmity towards the Asian racial figure as a perceived alien, hyper-capitalist, model minority threat (Day 2016). “The central, though often unspoken, question underlying all of this is,” Cheng pinpoints, “Are Asian-Americans injured, or injured enough, to deserve our national attention?” (2021).

Her inquiry helps us understand why pre-Covid discussions of the centrality of Asian Americans to American Buddhism, as articulated by Asian American Buddhist scholars and writers themselves, have not incited the kind of motivation that the images of violence have in facilitating this newfound attention. Instead, these earlier attempts by Asian American Buddhists were consistently met with erasure and exclusion (in the form of resistance, silencing, and marginalization) from many American Buddhist scholars, writers, and practitioners (Ikeda-Nash 2000; Lee 2011; Hsu 2016; Deveaux and Amaro 2016)³—including those interested in social justice. Reflecting on the Buddhist Peace Fellowship's complicated history with acknowledging the foundational importance of Asian American Buddhists, director Katie Loncke has noted “even I, as a person of color, initially resisted this work” (Loncke 2016). Such resistance speaks to the manner in which Asian Americans and Asian American Buddhists have not been seen as worthy of critical consideration, and thus have been excluded from most social justice frameworks. “There is something wrong with the way Americans think about who deserves social justice,” Cheng further

oppression. Gleig (2019), like Cheah and Han (2021), employs the term to refer to both heritage and convert Buddhists. Mitchell (2016) highlights the plurality of Americanness, making the case that there are many American Buddhisms. I concur with the above deliberations and use both American Buddhism and American Buddhisms as delineated by Gleig and Mitchell.

² There is a rich, ongoing Asian American scholarly and activist conversation about the complex positioning and participation of Asian Americans within settler colonialism in North America. For an overview of this issue, see the discussion by Day et al. (2019).

³ Here, I am not implying that Asian American Buddhists are separate from American Buddhists. Rather, I use American Buddhists as a broader, general category that is representative of American Buddhists of all backgrounds, including Asian American Buddhists. Indeed, some Asian American Buddhists have also participated in the narrative erasure, silencing, and marginalization of Asian American Buddhist communities due to a confluence of reasons. These may include the internalization of anti-Asian sentiments, including through dominant frameworks of social justice that reify model minority tropes and maintain suspicion towards Asian Americans, and what Cheng describes as “racial melancholia.” For a discussion of the concept of racial melancholia, see Cheng (2000) and Eng and Han (2019).

diagnoses, “as though attention to nonwhite groups, their histories and conditions, is only as pressing as the injuries that they have suffered” (2021).

If injury is the currency of exchange for visibility within the exclusionary logic of white settler Buddhism, then to even engage in the exchange is a losing bargain. The significance of Asian American Buddhists, therefore, should not be limited to the discourse of resistance-to-whiteness. In fact, understanding this can reveal the limitless possibilities of being. Instead of tiredly “insisting that others care” about Asian Americans when “the truth is that few are listening,” Cheng argues that, “All we can do is to continue to tell our truths, to know, even just for ourselves, that we are here” (2021). For Asian American Buddhists, these stories and their recitation demonstrate the undeniable truth and fullness of their existence.

In this article, I explore a theory of reciting as Asian American Buddhist practice. I argue that when Asian American Buddhists share their stories and experiences, they perform a critical form of religious reciting. This reciting articulates the reality of Asian American Buddhist existence amidst ongoing legacies of exclusion (which include federally legislated acts of formal exclusion as well as hegemonic denials of the Asian American Buddhist foundations of, and significance to, American Buddhism). Thus, reciting displaces the predominance of narratives about Asian American Buddhists, especially fictive narratives of their nonexistence, told by others.

Moreover, reciting exemplifies and amplifies Asian American Buddhist existence beyond injury and grievance, as it forges networks of knowledge, mutual recognition, and sangha amongst Asian American Buddhists themselves. In this manner, reciting as Asian American Buddhist practice draws from the historical tradition of reciting sutras to preserve and disseminate the dharma and expand the sangha. Reciting shares the cultivation of the Buddhadharma in America as experienced by Buddhist of Asian descent, and it fosters the communal memory of these realities. The prologue of Duncan Ryuken Williams’ seminal work, *American Sutra* (2019), is titled “Thus Have I Heard: An American Sutra,” a testament to the connection between the historic technique of sutra recitation and reciting as Asian American Buddhist practice. The prologue highlights that, for Asian American Buddhists, critical reciting is tied to a sacred moment of hearing and being heard.

This article investigates the recently established web platform, *The Young Buddhist Editorial* (YBE), as an example of layered reciting practices amongst young Asian American Buddhists. YBE was established in early 2020 to provide “a platform for the expression of young Buddhists and a safe space where such young Buddhists can foster growth, community and interconnectedness while creating a dialogue between young Buddhists and other generations of Buddhists” (“About Us” 2020). Under the direction of Asian American Buddhist youth, primarily of Japanese American or mixed-race Japanese American background, the YBE was created as a “digital space for young Buddhists to express themselves and build solidarity with other young persons, advocates, and allies across the country” (Mullins 2020). A central component of the YBE’s vision is “to preserve the stories of those who came before us while sharing the current experiences of young Buddhists” (“About Us” 2020).

I examine YBE as a discursive space, both in regard to the platform itself as a publisher of Asian American Buddhist stories, and in regard to its broader impact in reciting these narratives to the public. In addition to reviewing the articles and posts on the YBE site, I also analyze the stories YBE

members share about the organization's work and themselves in major media outlets. In doing so, I further argue that *YBE* serves as a discursive site of recitation that exemplifies and amplifies Asian American Buddhist existence beyond injury and grievance. What is most significant about their work, I contend, is not necessarily the articulations of resistance but rather the stories that depict Asian American Buddhists as ordinary and fully embodied in their complex existence.

The article is divided in two parts. The first section provides a theoretical overview of reciting as Asian American Buddhist practice and discusses examples of reciting in the literature on Asian and Asian American Buddhist experiences. The second section looks specifically at *YBE* and how it demonstrates various elements of a critical reciting. It highlights how *YBE* recites Asian American Buddhist reality as more than suffering and reveals Asian American Buddhist existence as that which has always been there.

A Theory of Reciting

Foundations

Williams begins his prologue to *American Sutra* with Nyogen Senzaki's 1942 poem, "Parting." The first line of the poem references the traditional sutra opening, "Thus Have I Heard" (2019: 7). In tracing these words to Ananda and his recitation of the Buddha's discourse after his passing, Williams explains, "'Parting' employs this classic preamble at another traumatic moment for Buddhists, but the Buddhist lesson Senzaki shares is not culled from stories from an Indic past, but rather inspired by an American present" (2019: 7). Senzaki's poem recites his experience of removal in World War II America, and in telling this story, he creates, as Williams notes, a distinctively American sutra. "Parting" as a reciting enables Senzaki to subsume his racial alienation within the broader cultivation of his Buddhist practice. He thus exists beyond injury, transforming his removal into potential for spreading the dharma.

In crafting *American Sutra* as a body of historical work, Williams not only draws on documents that have been curatorially preserved through "the political nature of the archive" (Joyce 1999: 36) but also relies on the stories recited by Japanese American Buddhist incarcerated themselves in the form of personal writings, oral histories, and written materials produced in the incarceration camps. "Given how thoroughly Japanese American Buddhists have been excluded from the narrative of American belonging," Williams explains, "it is perhaps not surprising that their stories are not readily found in most histories of that time" (2019: 5). In bringing forth these personal accounts, Williams himself performs a reciting that weaves the individual experiences together into *American Sutra*: "These stories, like Senzaki's poem, constitute an American sutra." Williams concludes his prologue with the same sutra opening, "Thus have I heard" (2019: 14), thereby announcing the commencement of his recitation of the teachings. In so doing, he evidences the significance, and longstanding technique, of communal recitation in Asian American Buddhist practice.

I reference the multidimensional recitation in Williams' prologue to emphasize how Asian American Buddhist storytelling enables the preservation of knowledge, the recognition of embodied experience (and, therefore, each other), and the creation of sangha. Moreover, such reciting provides

a sacred site for Asian American Buddhists to make their own meaning out of their experiences, as in the case of Senzaki's "Parting," instead of being reduced to byproducts of injury. Notably, the theory of reciting I develop here emerged, first and foremost, out of the spoken and written stories that other Asian American Buddhists have recited to me. The recognition of both a pattern and power in the sharing of these narratives unveiled a theoretical strength in the storytelling. While each story contained its own lessons, collectively, they hinted at a larger teaching on the importance of such reciting.

American Sutra is also significant in that it points out how some of the stories recited by Asian American Buddhists (such as, the popular discourse celebrating Japanese American Buddhist soldiers serving in WWII) may both critique and support hierarchies of settler colonial power, racial liberalism, heteronormativity, and the hegemonic nation-state. Just as Asian American Buddhist communities are widely diverse, so too are their perspectives and the stories they recite as their experiences. Thus, in offering a theory of reciting, I do not propose that Asian American Buddhist stories are monolithic, harmonious, or examples of "authentic Buddhism," and I do not seek to establish them as part of a theoretical "grand narrative." Rather, I contribute reciting as a means to understand the multiplicity of Asian American Buddhist being with rigor, and to take seriously the continued formation of Asian American Buddhist sanghas.

For the constitutive other, narrative technologies are common strategies of communicating otherwise delegitimated knowledge. In her study of education amongst enslaved and freed African Americans in the 19th century, Heather Andrea Williams discusses the importance of eavesdropping, and the subsequent transmission of information, as an important literacy (2005). Lindsay Pérez Huber details the significance of *testimonio* as a method in Latina/o Critical Race Theory and Chicana feminism (2009). Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor describes his notion of "survivance" as both survival and resistance, but also "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry" (1994: vii). Reciting operates within this shared domain of narrative apparatus and speaks to, and of, the perpetual existence of Asian American Buddhists in a white settler historical landscape of Asian exclusion.

Reciting, as demonstrated in the introduction, is also informed by an interdisciplinary interrogation of power and its injuries in order to illuminate the capacious existence of Asian American Buddhists. The structures of American race are bolstered by an affective dimension that Anne Anlin Cheng has termed "racial melancholia," which impacts both white culture and the racial other. Part of its operationalization is the racial others' internalization of white rejection and injury. "[T]he racial other (the so-called melancholic object)," Cheng explains, "also suffers from racial melancholia whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity" (Cheng 2000: xi). Reciting functions as an Asian American Buddhist technology of externalization that enables an expressive outlet for internalized melancholia. It not only renders the "inarticulable loss" decipherable, it honors the process as a site of religious refuge.

In his understanding of power as “violation,” education scholar Noah De Lissovoy (2012: 463) explains how power operates precisely to perform the injury that Cheng identifies as the legitimating marker of racial difference (2019, 2021). Violation, according to De Lissovoy, is “a simultaneous process of building and breaking, of construction and destruction, which seeks its surplus and satisfaction in the injury to the very identities it is complicit in producing” (2012: 463–464). In producing injury, the racial other then only registers through suffering and its corollary “marshal[ling] of sufficient indignation” (Cheng 2019: xi). Just as Cheng proposes the telling of Asian American truths as a path of self-visibility, philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson makes the case for narrative repair. Nelson asserts that since “identities are narratively constituted and narratively damaged, they can be narratively repaired” (2001: xii). She offers the “counterstory” as a mode of recuperation. “The morally pernicious stories that construct the identity according to the requirements of an abusive power system,” Nelson explains, “can be at least partially dislodged and replaced by identity-constituting counterstories that portray group members as fully developed moral agents” (2019: xii).

However, De Lissovoy warns that maneuvering solely in reaction to power runs the risk of overestimating its capacity and needlessly submitting to its terms. “The struggles of oppressed people have demonstrated a reality beyond the one that power recognizes,” De Lissovoy contends, “a reality in which those who have been injured rise again, undeterred, and in which power has not been able to control the terms of self and spirit” (2012: 479). It is at this point of convergence, where the limits of power are exposed by “the terms of self and the spirit” (or, in this case, the terms of self and true-self) that a theory of reciting emerges to shed light on the reality of the limitlessness of Asian American Buddhist being.

Jane Iwamura’s discussion of Japanese American civil religion (2007) and Edwin Ng’s proposition for an autoethnographic Buddhist critical-constructive reflection (2012) have both shaped the contours of reciting as critical Asian American Buddhist practice. In Iwamura’s argument that the Japanese American incarceration experience led to the development of a new civil religion and critical faith, she explores the testimonies given by former Japanese American incarcerated at the 1981 Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) congressional hearings. Iwamura positions these testimonies as the “‘testament:’ tangible proof, a statement of belief, a legacy and covenant” of Japanese American civil religion (Iwamura 2007: 946), imbuing them with a political-spiritual power. Her attention to the value of the testimonies underscores the strength of externalized expressions of lived experiences. Ng’s inquiry into the possibilities of the autoethnographic method for strengthening “Buddhist critical-constructive reflection’s commitment to self-reflexivity” encourages both the practice of reciting lived experiences and the possibilities of re-citing knowledge in Buddhist studies to account for “the challenges of Buddhist modernism to develop new interfaces between Buddhism, academia, and society” (2012: 169). Iwamura and Ng’s work also hints at the manifold meanings and possibilities expressed through a narrative act of reciting.

Reciting/Re-citing/Re-siting

By using the framework of reciting, I also evoke the polysemy of the term. Not only a mode of narrating Asian American Buddhist experiences, reciting is also, simultaneously, the affirmation of an element of Asian Buddhist practice commonly dismissed as an irrelevant cultural trapping, an act of *re-citing* that reconfigures notions of authority and expertise on Buddhism, and an active *re-siting* of the loci of American Buddhism. Reciting as an Asian American Buddhist practice, therefore, is not concerned with seeking approval or asking for inclusion. Rather, it is the expression of Asian American Buddhist truths and communal arising.

Many modernist Buddhist scholars and practitioners have relegated reciting and chanting practices to the realm of baggage (Cheah 2011: 72). However, these practices remain vital to many Asian and Asian American engagements with, and embodiments of, Buddhism (Iwamura, Joshi, Suh & Wong 2014: 10–11). In Jodo Shinshu, recitation of the *nembutsu* and paying homage to Amida Buddha is “a central form of practice” (Masatsugu 2008: 429). Likewise, the chanting of Amitabha’s name, along with sutra recitations, are significant communal elements of Chinese Buddhist practice (Reinke 2021). Reciting and/or chanting appear across the ethnographic literature on Asian American Buddhist practitioners, from young adult groups (Han 2017) as well as Burmese (Cheah 2011), Korean (Suh 2012), Thai (Perriera 2008), and Taiwanese communities (Chen 2009). “In many schools of Mahayana Buddhism,” Mark Unno (2021) writes, “chanting is viewed as coming from the deepest level of reality, the true nature of the self, which is emptiness, oneness, or the formless source of the buddha body, the *dharmakaya*”. Reciting as a personal expression of narrative experience is thus intimately tied to a broader history, community, and sense of interdependently constructed being.

In his discussion of the literature on engaged Buddhism, Victor Gerard Temprano critiques the scholarly tendency to assume the authority to define authentic Buddhism. “Those who believe themselves infused with the power and obligation to determine true or false versions of Buddhism,” Temprano warns, “risk falling into Orientalist styles of writing; of stripping Buddhists, and particularly Asian Buddhists, of their right to define and represent their own Buddhist traditions on a global stage” (273). Treating moments of Asian American Buddhist reciting as critical testimonies enables a re-citing, a new citational practice, that understands Asian American Buddhist practitioners as bearers of expertise and knowledge. At the 2019 “Buddhism and American Belonging Roundtable” at the Academy of American Religion conference, for example, Asian American and Asian American Buddhist scholars and writers (Joseph Cheah, Mark Unno, Sharon Suh, Hsiao-Lan Hu, Tammy Ho, and Mushim Ikeda) recited their experiences within Buddhism and the field of Buddhist studies as a move towards re-citing (“Buddhism and American Belonging” 2019: 126).

Jane Iwamura’s discussion of the Japanese American *butsudan* (home altar) tradition as a (re)creative and (re)orienting process demonstrates how reciting Asian American Buddhist narrative truths functions as an act of re-citing (2003). Iwamura opens her article with three scenes featuring a *butsudan*, the last of which tells the tale of her own experience:

Scene Three: A small shrine sits on top of an old dresser at the end of the narrow hallway. Although the young girl does not understand the full significance of her grandmother’s

obutsudan, she does comprehend that it is a special place where Obachan ponders Amida Buddha and brings her memories, gratitude, and hope (2003: 275).

The scene is a “personal recollection,” Iwamura notes, one that enables her to see her own family as worthy of academic study and scholarly consideration. “Looking back on my own experience,” she reflects, “the lives of my Issei grandmothers present a compelling dilemma about the ‘spiritual center’ of Japanese American life.” “The temple, although important,” Iwamura continues, “was certainly not the primary locus from which they drew spiritual strength.” Thus, Iwamura’s recitation of her experience helps to reveal a new analytical approach to the study of religion and Buddhism, and she develops her argument by drawing from the narrative recitations of the *butsudan* practices of her Japanese American Buddhist interviewees.

In realizing the early lessons imparted to her by observing her grandmothers’ *butsudan* rituals, Iwamura also demonstrates the significance of reciting as a resituation of Buddhist practice from the temple to the home. Reciting, therefore, is also fundamentally a re-siting. “If any ‘place’ was significant,” she contends, “it would have to have been my grandmothers’ *obutsudans*, or home altars, to which they were highly committed” (275–276). Here, Iwamura’s reciting draws attention to how erasures exist not only between Asian American and other American Buddhists, but within both Asian American and Asian American Buddhist communities as well. In this case, her grandmothers’ devotional practices illuminate a significant aspect of Japanese American Shin Buddhist women’s worship that was missing from the broader community and scholarly conversations.

It is not, however, simply the change in physical location that gives re-siting its significance. Rather, it is that such re-siting is manifested through practices of re-citing and reciting. Elsewhere, Iwamura (1996) considers how a scholarly focus on both the *butsudan* tradition and ancestral veneration calls attention to erasures within Asian American and ethnic studies, as well as religious and Buddhist studies. Ancestor veneration, Iwamura writes,

pays tribute to our intellectual ancestors: it expands existing scholarship by offering substantive material and challenges current ethnic studies and religious studies methodologies. . . . Seeing ourselves and our work in continuity with our ancestor’s spiritual understanding in this way preserves the integrity of their experience. ‘Re-siting’ becomes ‘reciting’ the spiritual texts which our ancestors’ lives represent: it is perhaps the greatest homage we can pay to them (1996: 167).

Asian American Buddhists Reciting in the Literature

As discussed above, the theory of reciting emerged out of the internalization of many incidents of Asian American Buddhist storytelling. Indeed, the growing literature on Asian American Buddhists and Buddhisms is punctuated by incidents of such reciting. These accounts often burst from the page, as though demanding a deeper kind of hearing. As an externalization of Asian American Buddhist lived experience, then, reciting offers the listener an alternative to the melancholic internalization of racial injury and violation. Though the stories might involve recounting incidents of racial harm, their very recitation models a liberation from such internalized suffering. Moreover, their recitation

serves as a crucial form of knowledge formation and dissemination, as listeners hear the truths of their own lives lived by others. In addition to exploring Williams' and Iwamura's work, I briefly highlight a few more examples to demonstrate how reciting as Asian American Buddhist practice begets reciting, thereby fostering sangha through mutual recognition and communal arising.

The introduction to Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge* welcomes the readers with a sensorial scene. Mirroring *American Sutra*, the book opens with recitations: "Amitufo amitufo amitufo. A hundred times we invoke the Buddha of infinite light, the melody a slow river as row by row we stand, approaching the center aisle in twinned tributaries, arriving at the altar in pairs" (2021: 1). The chanting of homage to Amitabha Buddha is followed by Han's recitation of her own experience at the funeral service for *Angry Asian Buddhist* blogger and friend, Aaron J. Lee, a prolific reciter of Asian American Buddhist stories himself ("Angry Asian Buddhist" 2019). The book's opening reflects its focus on the collective recitation of Asian American Buddhist lives and perspectives. Based on interviews conducted with eighty-nine young adult, pan-ethnic, Asian American Buddhists, Han constructs a narrative refuge wherein Asian American Buddhist readers can find a sense of sangha and belonging. The diversity and complexity of experiences represented in Han's work demonstrate the many truths that make up the reality of Asian American Buddhist existence. Moreover, the recitation of these stories by Han and the interviewees not only encourages communal recognition but also invites and inspires other Asian American Buddhists to participate in a collective practice of recitation.

In his review of *Be the Refuge* for the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, Hsiao-Lan Hu infuses his evaluation of the work with a recitation of his own.

Be the Refuge is a necessary addition to the study of American Buddhism because it restores some of the pieces that should have been in the picture all along and thus calls attention to the pieces that may still be missing—it 'makes space for many other communities who feel unseen, erased, or forgotten in our tradition,' as Lama Rod Owens comments in the front matter" (2021: 248)

Among the missing pieces are Hu's own stories, which he then offers to affirm the scholarly contributions of Han's work. Hu recites a moment in his academic career when a white male colleague—neither a scholar of religion nor Buddhism—invited himself to guest lecture in his "Buddhism in America" course:

He thought I wouldn't know anything about American Buddhism because I am not American as, in his mind, Asian Americans are not real Americans. (Of course the irony with that line of thinking is that, by the same logic, I could ask him what makes him think he understands Buddhism given that he didn't grow up in a Buddhist environment, but I was too polite to point that out.) He eventually decided to make his guest lecture about the Beat generation, a generation he is obsessed with, and basically said to my class that there would not be Buddhism in America without the Beat generation. After he left, my students immediately commented, that was obviously false: Buddhism came to America with the Chinese and Japanese immigrant workers in the 19th century! (2021: 248).

Hu's recitation not only illustrates the irrational logic undergirding Asian American Buddhist exclusion, but in the public sharing of this violation (De Lissovoy 2012), Hu both affirms the incident as part of a broader system of racialization and evades its injury through a sense of collective presence, recognition, and wonder (as experienced with his students in the moment of exchange and with the readers of his review). This is not Hu's only instance of recitation, indeed he references a chapter on his racialized experiences working with Rita Gross (2021, 2019), but this particular reciting is meaningful in its choral expression alongside Han's collection of recitations.

Sunny Lie's study on Asian American Buddhist identity was similarly inspired by a moment of Asian American Buddhist recitation. "This study emerged from a heart-to-heart conversation I had with a friend who identifies as an Asian-American (AA) Buddhist," Lie begins her article. "My friend shared how she often wondered how she fits into the ongoing discussion of the shape and form of Buddhism in the US. This contemplation of hers, her effort to place herself among American Buddhists, is what prompted me to study and eventually write an analysis on AA Buddhist identity discourse" (2020: 5). Like Han, Lie conducted interviews with Asian American Buddhists, but focused on those 25–65 years of age. In addition to reporting her findings on these recitations, Lie recites her own Asian American Buddhist experience to contextualize her research:

As someone who identifies both as an AA Buddhist and an adult immigrant, I have always been interested in differences and similarities between Buddhism as practiced in the US and Buddhism as practiced in my home country of Indonesia. Having been raised as a Buddhist by my mother (although she never labeled it as such), I found that rediscovering Buddhism as an adult in the US felt like coming home. That being said, I noticed socio-cultural differences between how Buddhism is presented and practiced in US spiritual spaces and the practice with which I was raised. The conversation I had with my friend reminded me of said differences, which, in turn, started off my research pursuit of Buddhism in the US (2020: 5).

Mihiri Tillakaratne, an Associate Editor at *Lion's Roar* focusing on Asian American Buddhist stories, further demonstrates the manner in which reciting Asian American Buddhist experiences is a collective endeavor that offers a path for communal arising. "My big dream," Tillakaratne has shared, "is that it's not just about having this token Asian voice . . . It's about normalizing voices of color in Buddhism in America until we get to the place where, when you open *Lion's Roar* or any magazine and you see the pictures of the contributors, of course there are people from all ethnicities and backgrounds and they have equal weight and that we're no longer thinking about Asian American Buddhists in particular as lesser" (Kandil 2021b).

Young Buddhist Editorial (YBE) as Discursive Site of Recitation

Having established the theoretical foundation of reciting as Asian American Buddhist practice, the remainder of the article examines the *Young Buddhist Editorial* and the recitational practices which emerge through the platform. I employ the idea of *site* to understand YBE's recitational practices in two senses: as a website, one that was developed by Asian American Buddhists and has an open

submission process; and as a sociohistorical, intertextual location that publicly rehearses the actuality of Asian American Buddhist being through the collective American sutras recited by its contributors. In the first sense, *YBE* publishes Asian American Buddhist narrative experiences, thus serving as a discursive site for articulating the fullness of Asian American Buddhist sanghas. In this regard, what is most noteworthy about *YBE*'s work is not the expressions of resistance to exclusion but the recitations that depict Asian American Buddhists as ordinary and wholly embodied in their complex existence. In the second sense—as young Buddhist leaders from one of the oldest forms of Buddhism in the US, the Jodo Shinshu tradition—*YBE* punctures the hegemonic discourse of white discovery simply by existing. I conclude by highlighting how *YBE* has contributed to expanding the discussion and recognition of Asian American Buddhists in the larger society by amplifying the historical truth of Asian American Buddhist presence. In other words, *YBE*'s reciting of Asian American Buddhist experience on a public stage is also an active re-siting and re-siting of American Buddhism.

Context

YBE began with nothing other than a recitation. Four years before its establishment, two Japanese American Shin Buddhist youth and college peers, Trevor Yokoyama and Devon Matsumoto, had discussed declining youth participation in their temples. They revisited this conversation a few years later with other fellow young adult Buddhists, and the support of Rinban Rev. Katsuya Kusunoki, at a retreat hosted by the Seattle Betsuin. The following winter, in January of 2020, Yokoyama, Matsumoto, and a small board of Asian American Buddhist members which included Emily Ko, Mia Li, Josh McKinney, Allison Tanaka, and Marissa Wong launched the *YBE* website. The leadership team wrote many of the initial articles, and *YBE* grew to incorporate creative writing, artwork, events, a book club, and other online offerings (Mullins 2020).

While the age gap in temple membership was an impetus in the formation of *YBE*, so too was the desire to highlight the lived experiences of young Asian American Buddhists. Increasing “the understanding of the cultural significance of Buddhism for Asian Americans” was one of the goals of the organization (Yokoyama 2021). “We noticed that being Buddhist and being Asian American, our stories are being told for us,” Matsumoto has said. “One of our big pushes is to have our communities tell our stories” (Kandil 2021a). Within the first five months of launching the website, *YBE* reached 5,000 readers. By the next year they published ninety-six articles (including a handful by other Buddhists of color) and hosted a number of workshops and events (Yokoyama 2021). In the spring of 2021, *YBE* was approved as a Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) Affiliate-Candidate organization (KC Mukai 2021).

As an affiliate of the oldest Buddhist organization in the continental United States, *YBE* joins a long line of youth-oriented BCA-related groups and programming. These include the Young Men's Buddhist Association and the Young Women's Buddhist Association, which later merged to become the Young Buddhist Association (Yoo 2000: 46), the Junior Young Buddhist Association, the Western Young Buddhist League, the Relevant American Buddhists (co-founded by Kenneth Tanaka) (Tanaka 2021), and the annual Technobuddha conference, to name just a few. The wide array of offerings on

the YBE platform mirrors the newsletters and bulletins produced by earlier young Buddhists in the BCA. Jane Imamura's account of the postwar popularity of the *Berkeley Bussei*, the Berkeley YBA newsletter, hints at a historical parallel between the two:

This journal became so well known that articles for publication as well as requests for copies came from all over the world. It was a unique collection of poems, translations from the sutra, thought-provoking articles, works of art, a rich mixture of all facets of Buddhist dialogue by writers and artists from all walks of life (Imamura 1998).

The YBE, however, is the first to operate as a digital space and intends to expand to be more representative of the diversity of Buddhist Asian America and American Buddhism. "Ultimately," Matsumoto has said, "we hope that YBE can become a cultural and religious place of refuge for Asian American Buddhists and Buddhists of marginalized identities" (Mukai 2021).

Platform for Reciting/Re-citing/Re-siting

In its website format, the YBE already functions as a refuge by housing the narrative and artistic recitations of its Asian American Buddhist contributors. In so doing, it offers new stories about young American Buddhists for scholarly consideration and begins to fill a lacuna in the literature. Chenxing Han has noted the dearth of research on young Asian American Buddhists (2019, 2021). Aside from Han's *Be the Refuge* and Mihiri Tillakaratne's Master's thesis on 1.5 and 2nd generation Sri Lankan American youth, there are few studies that take a serious look at this demographic. As Duncan Ryuken Williams has demonstrated, to hear the stories of Asian American Buddhists, one must often turn to personal accounts and narrative productions within the community.

Blogs such as Aaron J. Lee's *Angry Asian Buddhist* and the anonymously penned *Angry Tibetan Girl* ("Angry Tibetan Girl" 2011) serve as predecessors to YBE and have provided digital space for Asian American Buddhist perspectives since at least 2009. YBE joins and extends the choral recitation of Asian American Buddhist stories, published by Asian American Buddhists. Moreover, YBE's insistence on Asian American Buddhist knowledge ensures that these stories function within a larger project of re-citing. "The Young Buddhist Editorial is meant to center the stories and voices of Asian Americans within Buddhism and offer a different narrative from the stereotypical misrepresentation on mass media platforms," Yokoyama explains. "Rather than let our story be told by others, our religion has persevered throughout generations of trauma and ignorance" (Yokoyama 2021). This re-citational practice includes featuring Asian American Buddhist scholars and writers in their programs and workshops, such as organizing a panel discussion on collective karma with Jean-Paul R. Contreras deGuzman ("Face to Face" 2021) and hosting a "Building Buddhist Communities Retreat" inspired by Han's *Be the Refuge* ("Building Buddhist Communities" 2021).

Operating on an open submission structure, YBE publishes articles on an array of topics and in this manner, functions as a discursive site. Topics discussed range from race, to the experiences of teachers and healthcare workers during the pandemic, to transforming a personal hobby into an Etsy store. Issues of racial inequality, in particular, have been focal points and they demonstrate the complexity of the Asian American Buddhist experience. "We Stand United: Asian American Buddhists

Calling in for Solidarity,” issued as a statement by the YBE following the Atlanta-area murders, speaks to both the pain of the renewed surge in anti-Asian violence during the pandemic and the need for community-based responses instead of more anti-Black policing (“We Stand United” 2021). These recitations on race do not simply celebrate Asian American Buddhists. Rather, by highlighting the complicated sociohistorical dimensions of the racialized and racializing Asian figure (the ongoing scholarly discussion on Asian Americans vis-à-vis participation in the settler formation of North America, for instance, evidences the difficult nuances of the Asian American racial condition), they portray the realities of Asian American Buddhist existence.

In “We Must Not Lose the Drive to Strive for Racial Equality as Buddhists in the United States,” Rev. Tadao Koyama, the young minister at Tacoma Buddhist Temple, writes, “If we are really sincere about being allies or supporters in this fight for racial justice and living through the teachings of Amida Buddha in this life, then we can’t just be responsive in our actions towards social justice. . . . Racism and prejudice didn’t just pop up when George Floyd was murdered and sadly it has not yet ended either,” he reflects (Koyama 2020). Tying this to a discussion of Asian American racialization, Koyama highlights the complexities in addressing anti-Blackness as Asian Americans, and he cautions against model minority tropes of Asian American exceptionalism. Examples of Asian American success, he notes, “have been used to justify the superiority of our culture, the superiority of Asians Americans by whites AND ourselves to perpetuate the model minority myth” (Koyama 2020).

Here, Koyama is influenced by the collective karma generated by the broader discourse on Asian American activism and interracial solidarity. Asian American scholars and activists have traced the shifting dynamics of race that have entrapped and enticed some Asian Americans within the delusions of whiteness, including the myth of model minority success and the racial liberalism that developed in relation to Japanese American incarceration (Wu 2013), and also created openings for other Asian Americans to advance civil rights (Cheng 2014). They have also illuminated the postwar solidarity movements amongst Asians and Blacks (Kurashige 2007; Maeda 2009). Koyama’s article, however, adds a decidedly Buddhist quality to this discourse, reciting his perspectives as a Shin reverend and referencing vows to Amida Buddha as a model of striving for justice.

As De Lissovoy (2012) reminds us, explicit resistance to white power’s violation is not the totality of existence. Writing about youth agency against the hidden curriculum in schools, he argues that instead of privileging only the moments “in which students overtly challenge dominant understandings and interpretations, we should also learn to see a radical agency in the other worlds that students are already at work producing on their own terms” (479). While YBE as a digital space takes us out of the realm of the classroom, De Lissovoy’s assessment offers a powerful lesson for contemplating the hidden curriculum of both white settler logic and hegemonic American Buddhism. It also reminds us to hold with regard the potential for the realization of the “self and spirit”/“self and true-self” not just in other worlds, but in the other worldly.

This brings us back to a discussion of the *butsudan*.

It is in the seemingly ordinary that YBE exemplifies the power and significance of reciting as Asian American Buddhist practice. Contributions and curated series that display Asian American Buddhists embodying lives beyond injury capture a sense of self sustained by the interconnecting

care of sangha. In turn, these pieces enable their readers to sense a familiar recognition, thereby expanding the Asian American Buddhist sangha across digital time and space. One way in which the recitations available on the *YBE* portal illuminate the ordinary and familiar is through the familial.

“Is forgiveness something we do?” Matsumoto asks in his poem, “A Letter to my *Obutsudan*.” Addressing his *butsudan*, the narrator recites stories passed down from his grandmother:

Grandma said that her dad built you a special room after they were released. Was it better than the basement you hid in? Did he build it so you would never be taken from them again?

仏様、are you the keeper of our stories? The only time Grandma talks about her life is when I ask her about you. Will you keep my stories too? (“A Letter” 2021).

The *butsudan*, deceptively ordinary for many who have been raised in its familiar presence, becomes a confidant in this poem. Thereby, Matsumoto highlights its crucial function in receiving recitations: recitations of the *nembutsu*, the names of ancestors, and of personal experiences. As the keeper of stories, the *butsudan* holds all of these American sutras. *YBE* readers were encouraged to participate in this collective reciting through the “Home is Where the Buddha Is” photo series, which solicited images of family *butsudans* alongside narrative descriptions, or recitations, of their significance (“Home is Where” 2021). The call was met with more than forty submissions, making for a moving visual and narrative display of the emotional lives of Asian American Buddhists. “Each *Obutsudan* has a story to tell,” the series introduction states. “Please enjoy reading about the importance these *Obutsudan* have in our lives.” Setting the images and recitations together formed a *butsudan* sangha, transforming the familiar and “ordinary” into the other worldly.

This series speaks directly to the re-siting enacted in Iwamura’s “Altared States,” confirming the truth of her observations about Asian American Buddhist knowledge and practice. Not only does it re-site the loci of Buddhist practice in the home, it also situates Buddhist practice in ancestors, in the individual practitioners, and in the broader Asian American Buddhist sanghas. Iwamura’s words are worth repeating: “‘Re-site-ing’ becomes ‘reciting’ the spiritual texts which our ancestors’ lives represent: it is perhaps the greatest homage we can pay to them” (1996: 167). Reciting, then, also becomes the “cultural and religious place of refuge” that *YBE* sought to manifest.

Conclusion: Amplifying - Reciting as Here-ing

In the collective practice of reciting, Asian American Buddhists experiences are heard through a karmic knowing. In the hearing, the sangha mutually affirms and recognizes their existence. “Young Buddhist Editorial, which celebrated its one-year anniversary earlier this year,” Jon Kawamoto relays on the BCA websites on June 12, 2021, “scored a major media coup when it was the subject of a national ‘Today’ show segment on May 7” (“*YBE* Spotlited” 2021). The segment was heard by many, being cross-posted on MSN.com and Yahoo.com. It was not *YBE*’s first foray into the media spotlight. The organization was also interviewed by *Religion News Service* and *NBC Asian America* in 2021. “We’re trying to say: ‘This is how we as an Asian American Buddhist community, this is how we say we want to go, this is how we say we want to be represented,’” Matsumoto told NBC. “We’re not really trying

to change the narratives of how people see us—that'd be great, but people are going to see us how they're going to see us—but how can we mobilize our own community to unite and have a strong ethnic identity as well as a religious identity?" (Kandil 2021b). Matsumoto demonstrates how the YBEs recitational practice not only serves as a mechanism to externalize any internalized racial melancholia, it also functions as a collective religious expression. These articles were reposted and/or referenced by *The Washington Post* ("Millennial and Gen Z" 2021), *Tricycle* magazine (DeMiaoNewton and Jensen 2021), *Buddhistdoor* (Whitaker 2021), and by individuals across social media platforms.

The work of the YBE, therefore, exemplifies the theory of reciting as it showcases the multifaceted existence of young, predominantly Japanese American and mixed-race Japanese American Buddhists through their own storytelling. Thus, the YBE displaces hegemonic narratives of Asian American Buddhist absence and/or deficiency by insisting on the legitimacy of Asian American Buddhists' own experiences. The website's publications, amplified across various media outlets, performs a public recitation of YBE's intention to "offer a different narrative from the stereotypical misrepresentation on mass media platforms" (Yokoyama 2021). Thus, the YBE functions as a discursive site of recitation and possibility. Stories discussing music, family, art, race, and more emphasize the full reality of Asian American Buddhist existence beyond injury and grievance. They foster a different mode of hearing Asian American Buddhist being, and they highlight the widely felt need to hear stories often excluded, erased, and marginalized within Asian American Buddhist communities. For example, in discussing the future direction of the organization at the Buddhist Churches of America National Council Meeting, Matsumoto acknowledged the need to expand the scope of their recitations to include other Asian American Buddhist voices. "YBE hopes that as we grow," he shared, "we begin to reflect the diversity of Asian Americans from South, Southeast, Central, and East Asian backgrounds as well as those of various mixed-race Asian, queer, and socioeconomic identities without tokenizing and marginalizing others" (Mukai 2021). Writing for *Lion's Roar* and a broader Buddhist audience, YBE editorial board member Marissa Wong recites her experiences as a queer Japanese and Chinese American Buddhist and highlights other areas of marginalization within some Asian American Buddhist communities. In an article titled, "I Figured I Would Never Find Another: Being a Queer Asian American Buddhist," Wong writes that "I felt like I wasn't as 'authentically' Shin Buddhist because of my multicultural identity and because my Chinese family is Catholic. . . . Being queer was another level where I felt a little alienated from the sangha" (Wong 2021). In this reciting, Wong asks her readers to listen to the impact of the silences and erasures that have been created within her own majority Japanese American Shin sangha. For, instance she notes, "Since we don't talk specifically about queerness in Buddhism, I was always unsure of what it exactly meant to be a queer Buddhist. I can't recall a single Dharma message about queerness" (Wong 2021). In this way, she evidences how recitation is more than simply a celebratory act, but a religious practice that also requires Asian American Buddhists to hear how they might have contributed to suffering within their own sanghas. For example, Wong explains the difficulty of discussing her queer identity in her sangha:

There are a lot of generational differences in the understanding of queerness. Some people from older generations may not understand the complexities of being queer and

can be harmful to our community without even realizing it. Some don't understand that gender and sexuality are fluid or that you can be outside of labels or constructs. That doesn't make your identity any less valid. I struggled to come to terms with this, and I am afraid of being invalidated, even unknowingly, by a sangha member, especially because I love and respect everyone in our sanghas (Wong 2021).

By illuminating these marginalizations, Wong's storytelling asks her readers to hear her full being as a queer, mixed race, Asian American Buddhist youth.

Through the reciting of her personal experiences, Wong embodies the discursive power of the YBE as a site of recitation.

The organization's public recitation of Asian American Buddhist knowledge, recognition, and sangha as amplified through the media, actively creates a communal hearing and "here-ing." The highlighting of YBE's work on a national scale ensured that Asian American Buddhists were not only heard; it also announced that they were and are here, and that the violation and injury of exclusion cannot deny the truth of Asian American Buddhist existence. "Our voices are here, too," Rev. Koyama recited to the world, "and our voices matter" (Kandil 2021a). Indeed, reciting enables us to hear Asian American Buddhist existence as that which has always been t/here.

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