Stone lantern in the Issei Memorial Garden, Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Church (2012)
Photograph courtesy of author
Issei Garden as Performative Space

Courtney T. Goto

Constructing what it means to be Japanese American Christian is more challenging than ever as historic Japanese American churches give birth to fourth and fifth generations, as they become more multiracial, and as there are increasingly few who know the community’s history. In California, the Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Church (SJUMC) is a case that sheds light on how the creation and maintenance of space allow people to remember their past and enact what provides a sense of religious and cultural identity, which offers an alternative to what the dominant culture enforces. The gateway between the church’s past and present is not its archives, but the church’s Issei Memorial Garden, which was built to honor the Issei—first generation of Japanese immigrants—who faced great hardship.

In the early 1900s, the “Florin District,” where one of the predecessor churches of SJUMC was located, became one of the largest Japanese colonies in independent farming and a strong regional center for the grape and strawberry industry.¹ However, Florin also became a political showcase for the “Japanese problem,” feeding lawmakers’ fears about what would happen if more Japanese immigrated and became landowners, which provided impetus for the state’s Alien Land Act of 1913.² Florin was also one of four districts in California (Florin, Walnut Grove, Isleton, and Courtland) that took advantage of a 1921 amendment to create “Oriental schools” under Section 1662 of the California School Code.³ Born in Florin, my grandmother Alice Yamada Goto was one of the many children to attend these segregated schools.

Facing intense racism and alienation, churches became vital social centers for Japanese Americans, strengthened by the evangelistic fervor of the Issei. For example, from its earliest days

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circa 1891, the Japanese Methodist Church of Sacramento (renamed Pioneer Methodist Church after World War II) provided temporary rooms for single workers, English classes, and employment services. After several moves resulting from a growing congregation, the church moved to its permanent location in downtown Sacramento, what was then Japantown at 310 Q St. The Florin Japanese Methodist Church started with the opening of a Japanese language school and a Sunday school in 1913 by Yasaburo Tsuda. So harsh was the discrimination in Florin, they hoped that establishing a Japanese Christian church would help prevent misunderstanding with neighbors and promote integration into American culture.

As a result of the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans from the west coast during World War II, members of the Pioneer and Florin churches never returned to the area or had to rebuild their disrupted lives and churches, which became makeshift hostels for returnees. The Florin District never recovered its former population or pre-war prominence in agriculture. In 1951, dwindling numbers and financial difficulties led Pioneer Church to merge with the Florin Japanese Methodist Church in 1968. The two churches established a new church called the Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Church, located a few miles from Florin, on a four-acre site donated by the dispersed Merwin Memorial United Methodist Church. The new sanctuary and social hall of SJUMC was built in 1970, followed by the construction of the Issei Memorial Garden, which was dedicated in 1972.

Men now in their seventies and eighties recount how they helped build the garden. In 1970-71, Masao Yoshiyama, an Issei horticulturalist, led a group of about thirty Nisei (second generation) men to excavate and haul granite from Seichi Otow’s farm located in Placer County, which was 35 miles away. Working each weekend for 12-18 months, they constructed a 1,556 square-foot garden in the courtyard of the church. Mr. Yoshiyama (as people called him) handpicked every granite rock, including many that were originally half buried. After the men worked a boulder free, they would scoop up the rock with Seichi Otow’s tractor, lift it onto the bed of his truck, and roll it off at the construction site. Once they accidentally dropped a rock so heavy that it broke the wooden truck bed.

After Mr. Yoshiyama’s death, the garden fell into disarray through the 1990s, when it was maintained by a small crew of
volunteer men with no training in pruning a Japanese-style garden. With efficiency as their goal, they used hedge sheers or an electric saw to do their work, which (unbeknownst to them) led to the deformation and weakening of the trees. In 2002, a major redesign and revitalization of the garden began, which was led by Edwin “Ed” Kubo and a group of volunteer “Garden Angels,” who revived the use of traditional Japanese pruning techniques (as used in bonsai) to restore and maintain the garden. The revitalization of the garden defies the trend of most Japanese-style gardens at churches and temples in America, which suffer neglect and deterioration due to lack of expertise and volunteer help. At SJUMC, about fifteen people (mostly Nisei men and a few women, and nearly all retired) faithfully gather at 6:30 in the morning every Thursday year round to beautify the garden and church grounds.

The story of the Issei Garden is what Gabriel Fackre calls a “canonical story,” which is a narrative that has paradigmatic authority for a community’s sense of identity, integrity, and purpose. For congregations, these can include not only bibli-
cal stories but historical or cultural narratives as well. For example, tales of Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. could serve as canonical stories for an African American church. In this case, the story of why and how the Issei Garden was constructed, why it fell into decline, and how it was revitalized is a canonical story for SJUMC. The story emphasizes that the garden was built as an enduring reminder of the resilience, sacrifice, and faith of the Issei who founded the churches that became SJUMC. Recounting the revitalization of the garden renews the church’s sense that something important (i.e., culture) was almost lost, but it (and the garden) were saved thanks to the hard work and devotion of the Nisei to preserve what is beautiful. Furthermore, the story reclaims the ancient practice of honoring the ancestors, in this case the Issei pioneers and increasingly the Nisei generation that is passing away. By telling the story of the Issei Garden, people are performing Japanese American selves, constructing through the narrative what is important both culturally and theologically.

The narrative of the Issei Garden is not only a canonical story, but also a spatial story, which is, according to Christopher Tilley, “a discursive articulation of a spatializing practice, a bodily itinerary and routine.” In this case, narrating the construction and care of the garden puts into words the repeated bodily practices that create the space of the garden. The story and the spatial practices involving the garden are mutually supportive, meaning, in Tilley’s words, “the story and the place dialectically help to construct and reproduce each other.”

Born into this church, I too have been formed by the Issei Garden and its practices. All the people interviewed for this study know me personally or my parents; in many cases they are “church family.” Writing about Japanese American Christian identity at SJUMC is an act of constructing my sense of self and where I came from as a Sansei, third generation Japanese American. My own performative acts (defined below) in relation to the Issei Garden are part of the ethnographic research of the case.

As a practical theologian, I have set as my task the creation of an intimate portrait that explores the creative and pedagogical value of space for the construction of Japanese American Christian selves. I situate this work partly in relation to Dorinne Kondo’s work Crafting Selves, an ethnographic account of how Japanese workers at a small factory in Tokyo construct themselves and their lives through their everyday acts. While
Kondo attends to how subjects negotiate power, hierarchy, and discipline in a Japanese context, this study focuses on the crafting of Japanese American selves through imagination, memory, and aesthetic experience in an American context. For members of SJUMC, many of whom have never been to Japan and who do not speak the language, constructing what it means to be Japanese American Christian is a highly creative act. My assumption is that education is not a process of passively receiving transmitted information but of constructing knowledge.16

Performative Acts and Space
The term performative space usually refers to an architectural-geometric space, for example a theater, that serves as a container for performance but remains relatively unchanged by what takes place in it.17 Like a theater, the Issei Garden is both a physical and a transitional space between the subjective and objective in which play and the work of imagination, community, and creativity emerge.18 However, unlike performative spaces that are
physically fixed and stable, the Issei Garden is an evolving space whose form is sculpted by cumulative acts and is constantly at work in shaping the human agency of those who participate in it. In this analysis, performative space refers to a demarcated location that does the work of enabling people to explore, test, and rehearse cultural and historical possibilities through embodied acts that shape a contingent sense of identity and agency. Bodily acts are central to all practices related to the garden, including the story of the garden itself. Without the “doing” of the garden, there would be nothing to tell. As a performative space, the garden allows for everyday practices that construct identity, which include not only the work of gardening, but practices such as viewing the garden, telling stories about the garden, baptisms involving the garden, and sanctuary art based on the imagery of the garden.

Judith Butler’s theorization of performativity offers an important starting point for discussing performative space. According to Butler, gender is neither given nor pre-existing, but continuously enacted by the body, following certain cultural and historic possibilities. Butler writes, “[G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed [sic.]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.” For Butler, these stylized acts are performative in that they are both “non-referential” and “dramatic.” On one hand, in gender construction, performative acts are non-referential in that they do not assume that being a woman, for example, is a natural fact of biology with a pre-existing meaning or “essence” that is expressed. On the other hand, performative acts are dramatic in that they involve stylized acts that are partly self-determined, yet not fully, since living styles have history that limits and conditions possibilities. Butler writes, becoming a woman involves “compel[ling] the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project.” Although gender is a contingent construct, gender performances (along with their supporting discourse) conceal their origins as fabricated, convincing people that gender identity is primary and original.

Butler’s theory has broader implications for identity construction in general, including race and religion. American iden-
tity as white and Christian is reinforced and taken for granted both by people who belong to the dominant culture and by non-white and multiracial Americans who have internalized it. The U.S. has a history of missionizing people of color, treating non-whites and multiracial people as foreigners or second-class citizens who should forsake their culture for the sake of faith. As a survival strategy, many ethnic and multiracial Christians have taken up the performative acts of white American Christians, for example, by uncritically mimicking Euro-American worship styles and practicing a missionized theology that does not account for faith experiences of people of color. In her later work, Butler prefers the term *strategy* (rather than *project*) to describe the “situation of duress under which gender performances always and variously occurs.”26 Some ethnic churches like SJUMC have developed practical wisdom about facilitating disruptive experiences that destabilize and bring into question the white American Christian norms that people have embodied and internalized.

In what follows, I explore how the Issei Garden teaches church members to embody a set of cultural and historical possibilities which are not supported by the dominant culture, yet are grounded in communal memory and imagination of Japanese ancestry and immigrant experience. I would not describe the acts of Japanese Americans in this case as a parody of white culture, the way that Butler discusses the “subversive bodily acts” of lesbians, gays, and transgendered people, which unwittingly affirm traditional gender norms even as they try to resist them.27 While church members inhabit the performative space of the garden, the referential norm is not white culture, but Japanese culture (or what they imagine it to be). Although the performative acts called for by the Issei Garden may not directly challenge white American Christian culture, they offer Japanese American church members an opportunity to experience agency on other terms, if only on a part-time basis. As multicultural and/or multiracial people who embody multiple subjectivities, non-white American Christians may have access to or be able to retrieve multiple cultural or spiritual repertoires of performative acts if given the space to do so. In my own mind, performative acts are embodied ways of being and doing that enable people to construct a contingent sense of who they are. In the case of SJUMC, they are doing so according to the liberating possibilities offered by a performative space.
Haunting and Memory

As a performative space, the Issei Garden awakens people to new ways of being and doing by haunting the imagination and the senses, making them aware of both a history and culture. Kendall Brown argues that as pre-modern gardens in Japan have been “killed off” by modernization, they have been “reborn” as ghosts in nearly every major North American city and in other parts of the world. However, this is not why I believe the Issei Garden is haunted. Instead, it has to do with memory. For example, Jonathan was a senior in high school when he helped to build the Issei Garden. When he sees it, he imagines the Nisei as young men constructing the garden, many of whom are gone. When “Auntie” May sees the garden, she remembers her mother who loved plants, while Mark remembers his father, who was a gardener. As a memorial, the garden encourages the performa-

Photograph courtesy of Harris Studios
tive act of pausing, appreciating the garden, and remembering the dead.

The Issei Garden took on a ghostly appearance as the quality of its care declined. For example, in a wedding photo taken in the garden in 1978 (see previous page), the smiling couple seems to overlook what looms—tentacles of overgrown maple trees reaching overhead and weeds silently invading the dry river bed at their feet, evidence of what had been neglected and made invisible. As Avery Gordon would say, something was going unnoticed and being banished from consciousness, “a something that must be done,” which is a phrase she borrows from Michel de Certeau. According to Gordon, a ghost has designs on humans “such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory out of a concern for justice, a reckoning with its repression in the present.”

To define haunting, Gordon analyzes Toni Morison’s novel *Beloved* set in the era of Reconstruction, where the ghost Beloved forces people to confront what they wish to ignore—the lingering evils of slavery. In the case of the Issei Garden, the trees are also ghosts making known their demands to church members, including me.

When I was in high school, the trees in the Issei Garden seemed to cry out for care. Hence I embarked on a lone mission to “save” the maple trees, trying to prune them by hand as Grandma Goto taught me, though no adult at church would help me. Overwhelmed by the task, I gave up after several weeks of labor. Brian, a Sansei, had a similar experience 15 years later: While learning how to prune pine trees in a bonsai class, he noticed that the pine trees in the Issei Garden needed pruning, and set out to gain practice and give the trees some desperately needed attention. Ed Kubo (“Uncle” Ed to me) came to help Brian because there were too many trees for one person to prune, which is how the revitalization of the garden began. The garden was calling church members to perform certain performative acts that required recognizing what was at risk—not just losing the trees themselves, but the memory of those whom the garden honors. The people who responded—myself included—enacted possibilities that resonated with a traditional or imagined idea of being Japanese, as a people who care about beauty, eschew wastefulness, and attend to communal legacy. Rather than acting on explicit teaching about being Japanese, we enacted certain cultural and historical possibilities known mostly by feel (i.e., intuition and embodied communal memory) and brought to con-
sciousness by the evocative, which appeals to the imagination and the senses.

The practice of honoring the Issei who passed away and remembering what they suffered was once an organized practice. At least until 1983, SJUMC and Parkview Presbyterian Church, another local Japanese American congregation, held worship at the East Lawn Cemetery or the Sacramento Memorial Cemetery on Memorial Day. While Memorial Day is a national holiday commemorating the war dead, members of these two Japanese Christian churches considered it a day for remembering the Issei pioneers and the Japanese American soldiers who proved their loyalty through military service in World War II. Following worship, they would visit the Issei graves saying such things as, “You too struggled, didn’t you?” and “Now things are easy, aren’t they?” After visiting the graves, they would eat a meal together and enjoy each other’s company.35 While these memorial practices are no longer observed at SJUMC, presumably because the Issei are gone, they have been carried on in the form of practices involving the Issei Garden.

The pedagogy of this space lies in offering limited possibilities for performative acts that mitigate some social forces of the dominant culture that would subsume, homogenize, and erase communal memory of ancestral culture and spiritualities in the name of integration. First, the Issei Garden cultivates a people who remember their heritage by providing a space that is an embodied metaphor for memory, making it a hospitable place to experience haunting. According to Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Lorna Hockey, “[T]he ephemeral or fleeting nature of memories is acknowledged with the recognition that memories ‘fade’ or threaten to wither or die and constantly need consequently to be ‘kept alive.’ That memories recede only to be enlivened later can be conveyed through the metaphorical chains of association with the visible aspects of the elements.”36 In this case, the natural qualities of the garden are a reminder of the paradoxes of memory. The garden’s longevity and vulnerability, continuity and transformation, and its stability and impermanence can be seen in the durability of the rocks and the changing of the plants and trees with the season. The metaphor gives people a sense that in keeping the garden healthy and groomed, they keep alive the memory of generations past.

Second, the garden encourages the formation of a people who remember because a history of practices have been embedded in
the landscape. Not only is the garden layered with the memories of couples who were married in it, the children who played in it, and the families who took pictures in it, but the trees themselves are also memory forms, reminding viewers of patterns of care or neglect. When a pine branch is pruned with electric shears, it grows a grotesque looking “hand” with a wide, gnarled palm and knobby fingers. Some trees show evidence of sun and worm damage due to years of neglect or improper pruning. Even when branches are badly scarred, Uncle Ed sees beauty in the damage because it shows age and experience. The landscape bears a history of its treatment, sedimented with layers of personal biographies and social identities created by the actions and events that take place in them. In the garden, Uncle Ed has planted red maple trees that have been in his care for 20-25 years so that the church can continue enjoying them when he is gone. In addition to leaving material traces of himself, his image is etched in the garden. Because Uncle Ed has spent countless hours caring for it, Sharon (a Yonsei, or fourth generation, church member) thinks of him when she sees the Issei Garden. When he passes away, she and many others will still see him there.

Performing a Japanese American Male Christian Self
The Issei Garden is in some sense a gendered space, allowing Garden Angels to construct Japanese American male Christian selves. The construction, revitalization, and maintenance of the Issei Garden have been historically led and dominated by men, which follows Japanese tradition. Although the Garden Angels include several women, female involvement in the Issei Garden has been recent and limited. When women have been involved, their tasks are limited to fine pruning and maintenance, and they are supervised and trained by men. Though performed on a volunteer basis, men’s labor in the Issei Garden is an echo of a long history of Japanese American men working professionally in the landscape business in southern California. For example, gardening allowed many Issei to gain an economic foothold in the United States at a time when few jobs were open to them. Male narratives about the construction, revitalization, and care of the garden provide clues about the meaning of these performative acts that construct a sense of gender, cultural, and faith identity. My approach is similar to Kondo’s analysis of the narratives, actions, and context of Japanese workers. However, I want
to return to Butler’s notion that performative acts conform to a cultural/historical idea of “woman” to construct gender identity, which is widely recognized and experienced as normal. In the SJUMC context, the idea of the “Japanese American Christian man” subtly guides the acts of male Garden Angels. The narratives they tell suggest that Japanese American male Christian identity is constructed through performative acts that express respect, excellence/beauty, and hard work (sacrifice), conforming to a cultural/historical idea of who they are.\footnote{44}

In his telling of the construction of the Issei Garden, Jonathan Sakakibara narrated the story with admiration for both the Issei and Nisei generations, performing a self that pays respect to the elders. As the son of Rev. Joseph “Joe” Sakakibara (SJUMC pastor from 1969-87), Jonathan is one of the church’s few links to his father’s ministry, and he is one of only two Sansei who participated in the construction of the garden. Jonathan remembered a sense of urgency to build an appropriate memorial for the Issei while they were still alive. With the merger of two historic Japanese Ameri-
can churches, the Nisei felt a garden would express appreciation for this new church, which was made possible by the faith and dedication of the Issei. Even at age 16 or 17, Jonathan participated in the construction of the garden not simply because his father was the church pastor, but out of a sense of gratitude for the pioneering work and dedication of the Issei that founded the church. His father, Rev. Sakakibara, strongly supported the building of the garden and participated in its construction. In discussing what form an Issei memorial should take, the Nisei felt that a sculpture or statue, for example, would not appeal to the Issei as much as a garden, which would be reminiscent of the beauty and aesthetics of their ancestral land. Hence the garden was built with an intention to please and honor the Issei.

According to Jonathan, the Nisei who helped build the garden were deferential to the wishes of Mr. Yoshiyama, who had exacting ideas about what to plant, how to plant, which rocks should be chosen, and how they should be placed. No one ever argued with Mr. Yoshiyama because he was not only the boss but “the Issei guy.” Even when he asked the men to turn a half-ton or one-ton rock slightly, requiring great effort, the crew followed his lead without question. More than 30 years later, Ed Kubo is the new garden master. While it is clear that the Garden Angels follow his directions when it comes to the garden, respect was not automatically granted to him as it was to Mr. Yoshiyama, whose authority came from being Issei. Uncle Ed had to earn the respect of his peers (other Nisei men in the church) through his wise decisions about the garden. In Japanese American culture, while elders receive respect in general because of their age, peers must earn the respect of one another through responsible deeds. In both generations, practicing respect for male authority are performative acts that bestow dignity on these Japanese American men. For example, the Issei men, who were known to be hard on the Nisei, did so to assert their masculinity in a white racist culture that denied them agency.

In this performative space, both Mr. Yoshiyama and Uncle Ed have engaged volunteers in collaborative work for excellence and beauty in the garden. Sometimes Rev. George Nishikawa (Pastor Emeritus of SJUMC from 2001 to present) says to the men as they work (and he refers to the Garden Angels as men), “[Y]ou’re carrying on a strong tradition...[of] those who created this [and] who wanted all this to be a place of beauty.” In many ways, the beauty envisioned in the garden began with Mr. Yo-
shiyan. For example, he was determined to excavate a unique, split rock from the Otow farm, bring it back in two pieces, and place the rock in its original form as it had cracked perhaps a thousand years ago or more.48 Filling the garden with rocks was not about efficiency or getting the job done as quickly as possible, but about striving for the beauty and excellence that people associate with Japanese culture.

More than 30 years after Mr. Yoshiyama’s time, Uncle Ed also engages the Garden Angels in striving for beauty and excellence. From April through June, Uncle Ed instructs the Garden Angels to prune the new growth of the pine trees (called “candles”) in three stages, starting with the bottom third of the tree. He tells the Garden Angels to cut the candles in half to stunt the growth of the needles, giving the branches a neater appearance through the growing season. In ten days, Uncle Ed asks his helpers to prune the same trees in the same way, followed by an identical shearing ten days from then, followed by a final trimming in June, when they cut off the candles completely. All this is done by hand, one candle at a time, one tree at a time. While this is an inefficient way of pruning, Uncle Ed argues that they are not professional gardeners but hobbyists. He says that professional gardeners cannot afford the time to prune the slow way or the right way, but as hobbyists they have time and interest in aesthetics.49 Here the Garden Angels strive for excellence and beauty, never minding the cost in time and effort. As a result, the garden is crafted by hand according to an imagined sense of traditional Japanese aesthetics.

Working hard—doing more than saying—is how Nisei men perform a spiritual self in this context. Jonathan pointed out, “A Nisei guy at this church isn’t going to necessarily get up and offer a prayer, but he will show up faithfully to work at Garden Angels week after week.”50 Faithfully performing the everyday chores of the church, including keeping the grounds beautiful, is a silent witness to spiritual beliefs and commitments that may be deeply personal. For example, in 1996 Uncle Ed promised God that he would become a better Christian and serve God if he were cured of cancer.51 With his prayer answered, he has dedicated much of his retired life to the Garden Angels, including redesigning and revitalizing the Issei Garden. For Uncle Ed, the work of gardening is a gift from God, not simply work to be done.52 By working he enjoys the blessing of health, the opportunity for creativity, and the serenity and beauty of nature. When
he was a professional horticulturalist, the work also brought him wealth. However, in his retirement Uncle Ed feels a responsibility to share the gift of gardening with others, teaching Garden Angels how to care for the Issei Garden. The work Uncle Ed does in the garden is intimately connected with the way he experiences God’s grace and serves others because of it.

The hard work of the Garden Angels serves as a powerful witness that is seldom verbalized but is always present to the community, which does not go unnoticed. In every one of my interviews, people not only expressed appreciation for the work of the Garden Angels, they also seemed to feel that their work sanctifies the grounds of the church. From the Issei Garden to the outer bounds of the church parking lot, every square foot is cared for and made beautiful. The work of Garden Angels is a labor of love—meticulously and faithfully done for reasons sometimes known only to them. Garden Angels are allowed to work as long as they can, and every person is given a job no matter how small. Such practices bestow dignity on the aging in a culture that marginalizes the elderly.

In addition, the Nisei men who serve as Garden Angels are mentoring and setting an example for the younger men of the group, though there are not many Sansei. In his study of the Buddhist Church of Santa Barbara, Brett Esaki finds that, historically, gardening at the church provided an opportunity for young men to socialize with the older men, which is how the three men who maintain the Santa Barbara garden inherited their skills and passion for the work.53 Esaki writes, “Hence, the garden expresses the strength of Japanese American masculinity; older, skilled, employed men passed traditions down to younger men, and in the process taught respect and obedience.”54

Rick Kimura is one Sansei whose work in the Issei Garden reflects respect, a love of beauty/excellence, and willingness to work hard for the sake of the community—all of which aligns with a cultural/historical idea of being a Japanese American Christian man at SJUMC. Donating his time as a professional landscaper, Rick installed a water feature in the Issei Garden dedicated in January 2010. According to Rick, every generation should understand who the garden honors, pay homage to what the garden represents, and stake a claim in the garden.55 While the Nisei generation invested in the construction, redesign, and revitalization of the garden, for Rick the fountain represents the Sansei generation’s contribution. With Rick’s help, Yonsei (fourth generation) youth
of the church washed the rocks to build the fountain, which may help them to feel a connection to the garden. He hopes the fountain will present new opportunities to tell young people about the racism and hardship that previous generations experienced, much of which was too painful for them to discuss.56

Cultivating Beauty as Christian Practice

The Issei Garden is a performative space in which people can construct a complex, aesthetic sense of being both Christian and of Japanese descent. On the theological side, gardening can be thought of as participation in the “beautifying life of God,” a phrase used by Roland Delattre to capture the eighteenth-century theology of Jonathan Edwards.57 Edwards is known for his writing on divine beauty as the distinguishing characteristic of God, who governs the universe through the creative and attractive power of beauty. According to Delattre, “The beauty Edwards finds in God does not consist in being beautiful but in creating and bestowing beauty, not in being passively beautiful but in joyful, beautifying activity.”58 Agreeing to participate in the beautifying activity of the divine life in the world is an important part of Edwards’ vision of the moral life, which also includes celebrating and rejoicing in the presence of beauty as it manifests the divine life.59 In the case of the Issei Garden, when people groom the garden, they are bestowing not just beauty, but their sense of Japanese beauty, offering it as a gift of their ancestral land. At the same time, when they view the garden and tell stories about it, they are paying attention to God’s divine presence as Japanese beauty and God’s beautifying activity in nature. Creating and honoring beauty are critical, poignant practices of faith, given the church members’ experiences of racism, which has denied the beauty of Japanese ancestry. In addition, the church is located in a blighted neighborhood where nature has been swallowed up by parking lots, former car dealerships, and run-down strip malls subjected to makeovers. SJUMC is calling itself the “Garden Church” as a public witness to the presence of God in natural beauty even in this unlikely place.

In the space of the Issei Garden, people can explore a Christian sense of God’s beauty infused with an inherited sense of Japanese beauty. Citing the work of Donald King, Rev. Nobuaki Hanaoka (SJUMC pastor from 1999-2001 and 2003-2006) said,

Beauty is the highest form of spirituality in Japanese culture.
And where do Japanese people see beauty? Nature. So many
of the Japanese arts is re-creation of nature or at least the essence of nature—in the flower arrangement, bonsai, all these [building of gardens] and landscaping. They all encourage you to be part of nature and by becoming one with nature you are instantly in a meditative state, and I think that’s the beauty of a Japanese garden.60

Japanese aesthetics, Japanese spirituality, natural beauty, and divine beauty are commingled in the Issei Garden, providing a rare space in which faith and culture can be experienced in relation to one another. For example, the sound and sight of water running softly over rocks can have many meanings in Japanese and Christian traditions. The raw materials of faith and culture—in the form of imagery, symbols, and the senses—are available to Japanese American Christians for the construction of cultural and religious identities, guided by the limitations of the space.

Conclusion

The Issei Garden would not have been built if SJUMC followed the wishes of its architect, who felt that the proposed garden would be “too Japanese,” and therefore inappropriate for a Japanese American church. Where the garden is today, Wayne Osaki envisioned a basketball court and playground with small Japanese-style landscape elements on the sides to give priority to children and youth as the future of the church.61 Because the building and the landscape committees met at the same time, the architect was unable to defend his design to the landscape committee, which allowed them to move forward with constructing the Issei Garden.62 Although its significance was not fully known at its inception, the Issei Garden has been a place for people to construct what it means to be Japanese American Christian, a place where church members can put themselves either literally or imaginatively into a cultural frame and engage in performative acts. The garden exemplifies local, experiential, cultural, and religious education, which reveals implicit theologies and practical wisdom about passing faith and culture from one generation to the next.

While it may not be possible to escape completely the demands of conforming to a white Christian American identity, the case of the Issei Garden suggests that people can create a space that allows for an alternative set of performative acts, at least for the time they are engaged with the space. For marginalized people, it is vital to create or cultivate practices that
detour from the hegemonic sense of identity that the dominant culture forces people to enact if there is any hope of deconstructing it.

The puzzle is how to create spaces for marginalized people that intentionally invite liberating performative acts. One could argue that this is exactly what some ritual (or ritualized) spaces do, allowing participants to be formed in countercultural ways of being and doing. According to Tom Driver, ritualization involves the making or utilization of “a pathway through what would otherwise be uncharted territory.” For example, Christian ritual helps the faithful to cultivate habits that approximate the radical life of Jesus. Since it is patterned and repetitive, ritualized behavior can serve as signaling devices, able to store and transmit information across time and generations. The very acts of constructing, revitalizing, and maintaining the Issei Garden ritualized the space and made it meaningful. The ongoing participation and dedication of the Garden Angels give presence and a physical dimension to the Issei Christian legacy. The case of the Issei Garden suggests that ritualized space need not be inherited through tradition, but can be created by ordinary people. In producing other spaces like the Issei Garden, one might consider what canonical stories can be spatialized and ritualized, and how these stories might invite marginalized people to live into historical and cultural possibilities that construct a more empowered sense of self and community.

Notes
2. Ibid, 104.
3. Ibid, 110.
4. Ibid, 125.
5. Ibid.
7. Maeda, 111.
9. In referring to a “Japanese-style” garden, I am following Kendall Brown’s distinction between classic Japanese gardens in Japan and gardens outside
of Japan that are inspired by their style. Kendall Brown, *Japanese-Style Gardens of the Pacific West Coast* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999).


11. *Ibid*.


14. I discuss fictive kin as “uncles” and “aunties” in order to be transparent about my relationship to people and to reflect local customs of using names. I refer to most interviewees by pseudonym except where full names are used.


19. See Tilley’s discussion of landscape and human agency, 23.

20. Installed from September 13 to October 4, 2009, *The Garden Series* was a four-part series of large-scale art by Naomi Goto that transformed the sanctuary into a garden, which I discuss in a current project.


30. May [pseud.] and Mark [pseud.], interviews by author (Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Church, Sacramento, CA, March 26 and 24, 2008).
32. *Ibid*, 63-64.
34. Brian [pseud.], interview by author (Sacramento, CA, March 28, 2008).
35. Nakamaki, 266.
39. Edwin Kubo, interview by author (Sacramento, CA, June 14, 2010).
40. Sharon [pseud.], interview by author (Sacramento, CA, March 30, 2008).
41. In bonsai classes taught by George Makashima, a well-known teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area, 90 percent of the students are women, which suggests that women could play a larger role in the future of Japanese aesthetic pruning in America.
44. I take my inspiration for this section from Brett Esaki of the University of California, Santa Barbara.
45. Sakikibara.
46. *Ibid*.
47. George Nishikawa, interview by author (Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Church, Sacramento, CA, May 25, 2008).
48. Sakakibara.
50. Sakakibara.
51. Email message to author, September 6, 2009.
55. Rick Kimura, interview by author (Sacramento, CA, June 16, 2010).
56. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid, 286.
60. Nobuaki Hanaoka, interview by author (Berkeley Methodist United Church, Berkeley, CA, April 3, 2008).
61. The courtyard of Christ United Presbyterian Church in San Francisco bears the design that Wayne Osaki had in mind for SJUMC. Field notes (June 18, 2008).
62. Wayne Osaki, interview by author (San Francisco, CA, June 18, 2008).
64 Ibid, 26.