

“Unsettled ~ Resettled: Seattle’s Hunt Hotel” Traveling Exhibit: Interview with Azusa Tanaka, Japanese Studies Librarian at the University of Washington

Ray: Thanks for interviewing with us! Can you tell us about your traveling exhibit? Can you share some highlights in the exhibit? Why did you decide to do this exhibit at the University of Washington?

Azusa: This traveling exhibit “Unsettled ~ Resettled: Seattle's Hunt Hotel” was curated by the Japanese Cultural & Community Center of Washington (JCCCW). It tells the story of the Hunt Hotel and its role in the resettling of the Japanese community in Seattle after their return from incarceration camps during World War II.

In the wake of World War II, from 1945 to 1959, the Japanese Language School buildings served as temporary housing for Japanese and Japanese Americans returning from incarceration camps. Local leader and community figurehead Genji Mihara established and managed the facility, calling it the “Hunt Hotel” as most residents were returning from the Minidoka War Relocation Center in Hunt, Idaho.

The Exhibition has received financial support from the National Park Service, Japanese American Confinement Sites Preservation Program, and the 4Culture King County Lodging Tax Heritage Award. JCCCW and University of Washington (UW) Libraries both collect and store memories of Japanese American in their collections, and we work closely. JCCCW thought of us as the next exhibit host when the show was at Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center (July to September of 2016). I contacted our Pacific Northwest curator as Japanese American matters fall under her subject area, but all their exhibit spaces at the main library were full, so we happily took the opportunity to host the exhibit at the East Asia Library where I am.

Ray: That’s an interesting exhibit. As an Asian American librarian, why do you think this is an important exhibit to showcase? What was the reception for this traveling exhibit in your school? Any challenges in setting it up?

Azusa: The main mission of UW’s East Asia Library is to serve the faculty, students, and community users in their research on East Asian countries and their languages. A good part of the user population is Asian descendants. They have strong connections to and interest in their own ethnic community groups as well as their shared experience in this country. They come to our library to read Asian language newspapers or meet with other Asian users. Bringing in this exhibit to the East Asia Library was actually a good idea considering such user groups this library serves.

The curator from JCCCW helped set up the exhibit, so it went very smoothly. The only challenge we had was that the library space was not necessarily designed for exhibitions. We have small exhibit cases where we usually display small items such as books, photos, manuscripts, etc. However, the Hunt Hotel exhibit consists of ten huge prints and panels. Our library reading room, where we had the exhibit, is surrounded with book shelves, and there is no space for ten panels. So we had to scatter the collection all over the library

using easels and small corners just right for panels. We also put a number to each panel so that the visitors can follow the exhibit in the right order without missing any of the panels and prints.

Another challenge for hosting such an exhibit at the library was to find a way to protect the artwork; we are not equipped to securely place these works but we are good at preventing these precious books from being stolen. So, we used the sensitized strips on the backs of each frame.

Ray: What about the impact that the exhibit has on the community in Seattle, UW and on yourself as a Japanese American? What can community members learn from this exhibit?

Azusa: The exhibit was up between early November 2016 and early January 2017, right during and after the presidential election. It was the time when some people pointed to Trump's public pledge on a Muslim ban, and reminded us of Japanese Americans having been sent to internment camps during World War II. In addition to the Asian American community visitors, therefore, anybody would have learned about the kinds of experiences Japanese American went through during and after World War II, and perhaps imagine what it means for Muslims to go through something similar.

Ray: Parallel experiences are so profound and sometimes overlooked but they are something we always need to look at more closely. We wonder about what kind of external activities you are creating to support this exhibit? Are there any special programs or events in relation to the exhibit?

Azusa: No programs or activities, unfortunately. I wish we could have had some lectures associated with the exhibit, but all of our Japanese American-focused faculty in Ethnic Studies had just retired a few months before the exhibit. Instead, we were able to display a couple of books significantly related to the exhibit.

One of them, for example, was a biography of the principal of the Japanese Language School that this exhibit was about. Another book was a memoir of the daughter of this principal who was a student at the school when it was used as a temporary housing for returning Japanese Americans and who passed away very young a few years after the war. The benefit of having the traveling exhibit at our library was that we had the opportunity to link it to our strong collection of local history.

Ray: As a Japanese Studies librarian, can you talk about why it is important for those studying Japanese history to also know about the experiences of Japanese Americans in U.S. history? Is there a relationship between the two areas and can you describe why this connection is important?

Azusa: Academia has to be a fair place; so do libraries. When you look at a historical event, exposure to all kinds of perspectives is crucial. When the relationship between the U.S. and Japan during World War II is in discussion, for example, students need several angles to look at.

Studying the Pacific War just from the U.S. side or just from the Japanese side would not speak to the whole picture. Preferably, we want to add more perspectives like what was happening in Germany, what were the experiences of former Japanese colonies in Asia, and such. And I am sure these things are well-mentioned in class. The libraries can provide rich information and knowledge to support such learning. I have co-taught a class with German Studies Librarian in a history course on German and Japanese experiences after World War II. And this kind of exhibit would definitely help the students to understand the story of this side of the Pacific War.

Ray: What are some experiences or advice you can share for those who would like to do a similar traveling exhibit focusing on Asian American experiences on a small budget?

Azusa: We didn't have a budget! The curator was very helpful and hand-delivered the exhibit materials, and set it up for us using very limited things we had (easels, tapes, wires, and a hammer). So my advice is to ask for help!

Ray: Thanks for speaking with us! Are there any additional resources that you would like to share relating to this exhibit?

Azusa: JCCCW has a beautiful website and catalog about this exhibit:
<https://jcccw.org/hunthotel/>