Saving Furusato in the City of Quartz:
Japanese American Imaginings of Community, Culture, and History through the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Projects

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History 92 Senior Thesis

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Swarthmore College
29 April 2016
Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank my History advisors, Professors Timothy Burke and Buyun Chen whose insights have guided me through this process and who have consistently pushed me to a deeper understanding of what it means to write history.

Additional thanks to Professors Alison Dorsey and Marjorie Murphy whose classes on race and the working class have been formative in my understandings of power in the United States. I would like to thank Professor Bakirathi Mani for her insights on Asian American history and Professor Tomoko Sakomura for teaching me how to decode the visual.

Special thanks to my language Professors: Profesoras Buiza & Vila and Profesor Adrián Gras-Velasquez, as well as Senseis: William Gardner, Atsuko Suda, Yoshiko Jo, Christopher Schad and Tomoko Okuno, without whom the full range of historical voices could not be represented.

Thanks to everyone at Visual Communications, whose archive was crucial to this project, and especially to Abe Ferrer who shared with me rare insights on the archive and those who created it.

My deep gratitude to Mike Murase, Mo Nishida, and Evelyn Yoshimura who graciously shared and trusted me with their stories, stories which have been transformative in understanding myself as a fourth-generation Japanese American.

Additional thanks to the Genevieve Ching-wen Lee Memorial Fund for funding this research project.

And finally thanks to all the friends and colleagues, too many to name who have supported me throughout this process, though special thanks for two in particular: Rachel Berger and Yumi Shiroma.

In Gassho,

Samuel Mori
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Introduction

At Los Angeles City Hall, on February 27th 1977, Little Tokyo People’s Rights Organization (LTPRO), an activist group determined to fight against the destruction wrought on their community by redevelopment faced off against the Japanese Chamber of Commerce (JCC), representatives of the pro-business economic elite of the Japanese American community. The issue at stake was the imminent eviction of residents of the Sun Hotel, a low cost residential hotel in Little Tokyo, in order to make room for a parking lot for a the multimillion dollar New Otani hotel. This hotel and parking lot was to be built and financed by a consortium representing Japan’s biggest conglomerates including: Sanwa Bank, Dai Ich Kangyo Bank, Sumitomo Bank, Mitsubishi, Mitsui, and Kajima.¹

In his opening remarks, Steve Tasukawa, one of the core members of LTPRO, began with one of the major issues LTPRO activists had with the redevelopment process: the broken promises by the government. He says:

The redevelopment project as it was originally envisioned [was to] improve the living conditions and total environment of the Little Tokyo community. This was the understanding that the community had and based its hopes on.²

However, instead of witnessing a revitalization of the community, Tasukawa contends that redevelopment has wrought the demolition of community facilities, lack of replacement housing, displacement and the lack of community institutions as promised in the original plan. He emphasizes how the community has suffered, not benefited from the city-facilitated influx of corporate capital.

¹ Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1190, 1220.
² Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1200.
The way that Tasukawa defines the limits of the community of Little Tokyo are important. He defines community as: “the residents, the workers, and the small business operators.” Particularly important are his inclusion of the residents of Little Tokyo and his exclusion of corporate interests. At the time of eviction many of the low-income hotels still catered to Issei (Japanese American term for the first or immigrant generation) bachelors, however they also catered to a growing Hispanic working-class population. In contrast to his inclusion of Hispanic residents, Tasukawa construes these Japanese corporate interests as “very much opposed to the needs of the people in our community.”

In their rebuttals of LTPRO’s testimonies, the JCC representatives used varying tactics. One member questioned the legitimacy of LTPRO by claiming that “LTPRO represents about three percent of the entire community.” He further discredited them by saying, “We feel like the community has been disgraced by the very vocal and disgusting actions [of LTPRO].” This Chamber member dismissed LTPRO on the assumptions that Little Tokyo was an essentialized Japanese community and that its only stakeholders were the Japanese Americans of Southern California. Dismissing LTPRO’s concerns about the evictions he pointed out that, “not one of them [residents of the Sun Hotel] are of Japanese ancestry.”

In contrast to the essentialized defense of Little Tokyo redevelopment, Kenji Ito, another chamber member who had practiced law in Little Tokyo for the last 30 years, rebutted LTPRO using a discourse appealing to a commercially based multiculturalism. He asserted that Little Tokyo did not belong to Japanese Americans, but rather:

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3 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Discs 1160, 1174. One resident Alphonso claimed about the Sun Hotel: Éramos Mexicanos, la mayoría, hay cuantos Japoneses, pero la mayoría, Mexicanos. [We were Mexican, the majority, a few Japanese, but the majority- Mexicans].
4 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1201.
It belongs to all of the people, everywhere, who might desire to come to Little Tokyo for pleasure or for enlightenment, to taste the fish or for whatever reason. From that vantage point, that is, from the standpoint of all the people, not just the Japanese ethnic group, I would like the council to consider the matter at hand.\(^5\)

Like the LTPRO activists, Ito does not see Little Tokyo as solely a Japanese (American) space. However, his vision was not rooted in the same working class immigrant solidarity as LTPRO, rather it was rooted in a color-blind multi-ethnic ethos where “culture” is commodified and abstracted from the people who produce it. In this imagining, then, Little Tokyo does not belong to those who built the community, but rather to those who can afford to experience it.

This paper will examine how these two different images of enclave, ethnicity and community were formed in the period between 1969-1980. It will look at how a variety of factors from generational differences, civic center expansion, experiences of internment, the rising Japanese economy, the rise of cultural consumption, an emergent Asian American movement all conditioned new visions and aspirations that Japanese Americans of Southern California held for their enclave. I will argue that in addition to an architectural and economic reconstruction of the enclave, there was an ideological reconstruction of the space as an essentialized ‘historic home’ for Japanese Americans worthy of protection and preservation.

**Historiography**

The historiography on Los Angeles’s Little Tokyo redevelopment has been documented through two dominant frameworks: that of Asian American history - especially that of the Asian American movement and the economic framework of the post-Fordist restructuring of the Los Angeles urban economy. In the framework of the Asian American Movement, attention is focussed on the struggle waged by activists against the destruction of their historic community

\(^5\) Ibid.
and the solidarity they formed with low-income Blacks and Latinos who lived and worked in
Little Tokyo. This history centers, implicitly or explicitly, the experiences of Japanese American
students who were radicalized in the campus movement for ethnic studies. Further it
conceptualizes the anti-redevelopment struggle as a crucial moment in the formation of a
distinctly Japanese *American* identity. In the latter framework, that of restructuring of the
post-Fordist city in Los Angeles, the focus is on how the city and the pro-growth Bradley
(1973-1993) administration courted Japanese capital in an attempt to “revitalize” and
“internationalize” the downtown area, focussing on the disruptive nature of the
internationalization of capital on local communities. 6

Hillary Jenks’s dissertation covers much of the same material as this thesis and is a useful
starting point for understanding the scholarship on how scholars center Little Tokyo
redevelopment in narratives of Japanese American ethnic formation. In her dissertation: “*Home
is Little Tokyo*”: Race, community, and memory in twentieth century Los Angeles, Hillary Jenks
argues:

> The process of redevelopment...forced Japanese Americans to question concepts of
> nation, race, and ethnicity, and the evolving function, significance, and future of the
> enclave...Ultimately, the redevelopment experience assured the continuation of the
> enclave, reanimated shared historical connections between Japanese Americans and
> Chicanos, and expanded the possible formulations of Japanese American political and
> racial identity. 7

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7 Jenks, 2008. 204-205.
She convincingly argues that structural integration in employment and housing as well as dispersal from the enclave instilled in Japanese Americans of all generations to center the enclave “in coming to terms with what it meant to be Japanese American.”

Kurashige’s analysis of redevelopment, written through the lens of the Nisei Week festival, naturally is the account that most thoroughly integrates the voices of Nisei, especially in the context of their conscious positioning as loyal Americans during World War II. In the words of one prominent Nisei columnist and Little Tokyo commentator, George Yoshinaga, “If we don’t watch out (perhaps it’s too late already), there will be nary a Nisei businessman left in Little Tokyo. It will become an all Japan operation.” Yoshinaga sounded an alarm in the face of the perceived “Japanification” of the Nisei Week festival and asserted: “We are not Japanese. That’s not my culture. I’m American.”

While Jenks and Kurashige center questions of ethnicity in their monographs, other scholars focus on the internationalization of capital. Davis’s macro-level account of post-Fordist restructuring in Los Angeles is the best representation of a political and economic account of redevelopment. To Davis, redevelopment policy is emblematic of macro-level shifts in population and production. In a lengthy paragraph on these shifts he declares:

For if L.A.’s Downtown is in any sense paradigmatic, it is because it condenses the intended and unintended spatial consequences of the political economy of post-Fordism: that is to say, the rise of new globalized circuits of finance and luxury consumption amid

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8 Jenks, 2008. 225.
9 Nisei week is an annual street festival that is held in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo. The first festival was celebrated in 1934, major features of the festival over the years include traditional Japanese Ondo dancing down first street, a carnival, and a beauty pageant. For more information see Japanese American History: An A-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present.
10 Nisei is a term for “Second generation” - they are the children of the immigrant generation and parents of the Sansei. They were generally born in the late 20s and early 30s and were young adults when Japanese Americans were interned. For more info see Japanese American History: An A-to-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present.
wage industrial economy. But there is no single, master logic of restructuring, rather the complex intersection of two separate marco-processes: one based on the overaccumulation of bank and real-estate capital (most recently from the recycling of the East Asian trade surplus to California); the other arising from the reflux of low-wage manufacturing and labor-intensive services in the wake of unprecedented mass immigration from Mexico and Central America.  

In this conceptualization, redevelopment and the evictions of the Sun Hotel and other low-income residential hotels to make way for hotels, office buildings and cultural complexes comes to represent a clash between two markers of the post-Fordist economy: Japanese capital and post-1965 low-wage Mexican and Central American immigrants.

Palumbo-Liu also centers his analysis of Little Tokyo in a larger discussion about the meaning of the post-Fordist moment to Asian American communities. He quotes David Harvey’s the Urban Experience on the emergence of a new regime of flexible production. Speaking of 1972 and the demolition of the modernist Pruitt-Igoe Housing Harvey claims:

> It is roughly since then that the capitalist world, shaken out of the suffocating torpor of the stagflation that brought the long postwar boom to a whimpering end, has begun to evolve a seemingly new and quite different regime of capital accumulation...The new regime is marked by a startling flexibility.  

In this watershed moment for capitalism, foreign investment, which for California cities increasingly meant that Japanese investment as well as capital from Hong Kong, Seoul and Singapore, would be called on to modernize the cityscape. However, Palumbo-Liu goes beyond Davis and claims that not only does this post-Fordist reshaping of the city entail a deterrioralization and internationalization of capital, but that it also provided the material base for the reorganization of relations between ethnic communities, space and nation.

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Suga is the only scholar who writes a history of redevelopment that emphasizes its positive side. Unlike any of the other scholars, Suga centers the fundraising trips to Japan undertaken by Nisei and Kibei\textsuperscript{15} businessmen. She underscores the importance of these trips in facilitating the construction of important community structures such as the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (hereafter JACCC), the Japan-America theater, Little Tokyo Towers (a low income housing project), and Higashi Honganji - a Buddhist temple.\textsuperscript{16} She also critiques the academic fixation on the construction of the New Otani hotel and the eviction of the Sun Hotel and Sun Building. Quoting one businessman from the LA Times, she claims, “most of the local business people favored the construction of the hotel.”\textsuperscript{17} In conclusion, she argues that focus on the Sansei activism opposing the redevelopment, obscures the fact that many Nisei saw redevelopment as a way to save the enclave.\textsuperscript{18}

Suga’s critiques can be understood from her position within the Japanese academy and consequently as the only scholar writing about redevelopment outside the American academy. Diane Fujino has noted that, in an implicit dialogue with the “model minority myth,” many scholars of Asian American activism root their analyses in “radicalism, anti-imperialism, internationalism, and Third World solidarity.”\textsuperscript{19} In this way, while I agree with Maeda, that Suga is guilty of privileging “…the perspective of the Japanese American middle class and business elite,”\textsuperscript{20} I believe that her critique is useful in shedding light on parts of the history that have been

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\textsuperscript{15} Nisei is the second generation of Japanese Americans while Kibei were Nisei who were educated in Japan.
\textsuperscript{17} Suga, 2004. 247. As I will demonstrate later, local support for the hotel assumed local ownership.
\textsuperscript{18} Suga, 2004. 251.
\textsuperscript{19} Fujino, 2008. 148.
\textsuperscript{20} Maeda, 2012. 66-67.
marginalized or glossed over in the understandable attempt to deconstruct the damaging and pervasive “model minority myth.”

The most useful addition to the literature the Suga’s monograph provides is the decentering of the Sansei student activists and their struggle for the Sun Hotel. In the historiography of redevelopment, especially in the Palumbo- Liu and the Liu & Geron monographs, the construction of the New Otani Hotel and the struggle to save the Sun Hotel come to signify redevelopment itself. This is a problematic choice, because the centering of the Sun Hotel and Building struggle implicitly centers the activities of LTPRO and consequently the voices of young Sansei activists. Though Suga is wrong to assume that the voices of Nisei business elites are the primary lens through which we should understand redevelopment, her decentering of the activists is thought provoking. Beyond the Sansei activists and Nisei elites, a more complete history of redevelopment should include the voices of Shin-issei immigrants,21 city administrators, Nisei progressives, Japanese street gangs, Latino residents and Japanese corporate representatives. The inclusion of these histories can only enrich the history of redevelopment in Little Tokyo and provide a deeper understanding of the radicalization of the Sanseis, the re-thinking of Japanese American identity and the concrete ways that the redefinitions of ethnicity and identity played out in City Hall, activist spaces, public hearings, suburban living rooms and activist films.

Right now is a particularly exciting time to revisit the subject of Little Tokyo redevelopment because of the recent indexing and publicization of the entire Visual Communication’s Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection by their 2014 summer Getty intern.

Thanks to their hard work, researchers now have access to original footage shot by Visual Communications, documenting the redevelopment struggle as it happened. A thorough analysis of the contents of this archive will hopefully provide a fresh, new perspective on the scholarship that cannot be gleaned from photographs, oral histories and newspapers.

Even though I believe that the analyses of scholars of the Asian American movement and of shifts in international capitalism are correct, I find their narratives to be unsatisfying in understanding how the Japanese American community saw the redevelopment project. In my mind the academic focus on the LTPRO struggle elides previous ways in which the community was being reimagined irrespective of a government agency. This paper tries as much as possible to move away from the “impact-response” way of writing history of activism where activists are “responding” to some sort of governmental “impact.” The aim of this paper then will be to write a history of the Little Tokyo redevelopment that centers Japanese - American efforts to reimagine and rebuild their community.

Outline of Paper

I will begin with a ‘Prologue,’ drawing out the major shifts in the social economy of Little Tokyo and the various people who have called it home since its beginning in 1884. This section will demonstrate how Little Tokyo became the heart of the Japanese American community in the prewar war (1921-1941) then became the center of a thriving Great Migration Black community and finally the macro-economic and racialized forces that prefigured its designation as a uniquely Japanese (American) community by the 1960s. In my first chapter, I will examine the how Japanese American youth in the 1960s ideologically reconstructed the enclave as an enduring symbol of Japanese American history and ethnicity. Central to this
reconstruction were the identity politics and power movements that swept across college campuses in the late 1960s. In my second chapter, I will examine four redevelopment projects from the period between 1969 and 1980: a mall, a hotel, senior housing, and culture and community center. Through these projects I will examine what it meant for Japanese Americans to translate their visions of community into concrete structures and how they negotiated the multiple and contradictory meanings of ‘Little Tokyo community.’ In my conclusion, I will end with a reflection on the meaning of writing history both personally and politically.
Prologue: A Brief History of LA’s Little Tokyo

Little Tokyo is a small district that currently occupies a two by three block area just a mile south of the central business district in downtown Los Angeles. Officially, the district is bound on the north side by temple street, to the south by 3rd street, to the west by Los Angeles street, and to the east by Alameda street. However these are only the current boundaries, many community have argued that the extent of the enclave reached as far as sixth street to the south and to the Los Angeles river to the east during its heyday.

According to a community history, Little Tokyo: 100 Years in Pictures written by Mike Murase an LTPRO activist, the founding of Little Tokyo goes back to when a Japanese sailor, named Kame, opened a restaurant on the westside of Los Angeles street in 1884. By 1906,

(fig. 1. Map of Little Tokyo land use 1963, LTRA, General Plan for Little Tokyo. 11).

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23 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association (LTRA), General Plan for Little Tokyo. 11.
24 Nishida interview, 2015. Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection, disc 1160.
lured by the booming oil, railroad and a destructive earthquake in San Francisco up north, about 10,000 Issei migratory workers had congregated in Little Tokyo— the overwhelming majority being men. After the implementation of the Gentleman’s Agreement in 1908 whereby Japan promised not to permit the migration of Japanese laborers to the United States, around 30,000 women joined their male Issei peers as picture brides or yobiyose (those who were called) in the period between 1910 and 1924.

However in 1924 with a revised immigration act, all further migration from Japan was halted, and yet, it is precisely this period of social and legal exclusion (1925-1941) that has been referred to as the ‘heyday’ of Little Tokyo. According to Murase, key factors that made this a golden age for the enclave were the highly integrated economic networks within the community that sustained an ethnic economy, stringent segregation, an organized Japanese exclusion movement and the birth of the first generation born in the United States, the Nisei. It was estimated that during this period, the majority of the 35,000 Japanese Americans living in Los Angeles County lived within a three-mile radius centered on First and San Pedro streets.

This combination of economic and spatial cohesion contributed to the flourishing of Little Tokyo as a center for Japanese American social life. On the seedier side of things there were gambling and drinking institutions, nomiyas, like the Tokyo Club, which thrived off of exploiting the meager earnings of Issei men and yet nevertheless contributed funds to support Nisei college students, fed people during the Great Depression and offered credit to farmers and merchants within the community. One Nisei, Mr. Kaku who grew up in Little Tokyo during the

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26 Murase, 1983. 7.
27 Murase, 1983. 8.
28 Murase, 1983. 11.
29 Ibid.
30 Murase, 14, 1983.
20s and 30s fondly remembered the summer Sumo tournament that would bring in spectators from across the city. He remembered that they would “always bring their children around and the children would probably be running from one store to another looking at things they want.” He also remembered the New Year’s program: “every year, no matter how old the actors, actresses would get, we always used to have a program at the old Yamato Hall, where around 350-400 could get in and have a seat and watch the program. And it would start around 7:30 PM at night and then end around 10:30 or 11. And then after that they would drop in at one of these nishiyas or have a light refreshment to take to eat before they go home.”

In August, there was the Nisei Week festival which was inaugurated in 1934, originally aimed at reinforcing ethnic solidarity and commercial loyalty between the Issei and Nisei generations. The inaugural event featured sales by Issei merchants, fashion shows, kendo, sumo, and judo tournaments as well as a huge Japanese street-dancing ondo celebration. Other events would showcase the agricultural innovations and accomplishments of the Issei as well as reproduce the gender hierarchy within the ethnic community in the form of beauty and baby contests. On the eve of World War II, then, Little Tokyo was the economic, residential and social center for Japanese Americans of Southern California, with its integrated network of farmers and stringent walls of spatial segregation and economic segregation.

On December 7, 1941, after the Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor, evacuation notices began appearing in February and March of 1942, beginning an infamous period in

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31 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1163.
32 Murase, 13, 1983.
33 Kurashige, 54-56, 2002.
Japanese American history where 110,000 West Coast residents of Japanese ancestry were rounded up and placed in internment camps.\textsuperscript{34}

With the draw of defense industry work but the absence of the Japanese, Little Tokyo became the home of a new immigrant group from the rural South: African Americans. Though structures such as Nishi Honganji Buddhist Temple on First Street spoke to a former Japanese American presence, the composition and culture of the enclave was completely changed.\textsuperscript{35} The enclave, newly dubbed “Bronzeville” boasted Black owned businesses and institutions such as barber shops, restaurants, churches and, most famously, jazz nightclubs.\textsuperscript{36}

Though a cultural mecca, Bronzeville revealed problems of New Deal policy planning, especially as it played out in Southern California. While the federal government was busy subsidizing housing construction through discriminatory private developers, approximately 25,000 Black newcomers to Los Angeles were squeezed into makeshift dwellings in the one-square mile that consisted Bronzeville.\textsuperscript{37} Reacting to complaints of substandard housing and racialized fears of contamination, city officials were moved to embrace condemnation, aggressive screening of Black residents for diseases and public housing construction.\textsuperscript{38}

After the war, the pressures for Japanese Americans not to reconstruct their Little Tokyo’s or return to their former enclaves came from within and without the community. Some ‘progressives’ within the Japanese American community saw resettlement as an opportunity to realize integration. One Nisei opined, “The Little Tokyo’s have been shattered and- I hope - will

\textsuperscript{34} Niiya, 1993. 10-19.
\textsuperscript{35} Murase, 1983. 16.
\textsuperscript{36} Kurashige, 2008. 160.
\textsuperscript{37} Kurashige, 2008. 161.
\textsuperscript{38} Kurashige, 2008. 161.
not be put together again.”

Top federal officials and white progressives also reiterated this view. The Committee on Resettlement of Japanese Americans dictated, “Special attention should be given to the development of a sound program to prevent the formation of a ‘Little Tokyo’ or segregated district in your community.”

Historian Scott Kurashige further points out that white progressives who opposed internment often “Believed their advocacy could succeed only if Japanese Americans assimilated to Eurocentric norms.” And yet, despite their pleas, many Japanese Americans returned to Little Tokyo / Bronzeville.

The immediate postwar housing situation for Japanese Americans looking to resettle was dire. In the immediate aftermath of World War II anyone coming to Los Angeles whether they be a discharged veteran, a Black migrant from the South, or a returning internee would have encountered a housing market in crisis. In March of 1945, L.A.’s Mayor Bowron, a liberal republican, begged FDR: “I appeal to you for help in connection with a critical housing shortage in Los Angeles...There is simply no place for them [everyone] to live.” The scale of the crisis was enormous: 165,000 families, including 50,000 veterans were living in alternative housing which included tents, garages, trailers and hotels. According to a state commission, an estimated 280,000 new housing units would be required to end the crisis. It was in this context that Japanese Americans looked to their former enclave for housing. Japanese American families were crowded into hostels, residential hotels, churches and temples in Bronzeville / Little Tokyo as well as Skid Row.

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40 Kurashige, 2008. 182.
42 Parson 2005. 76.
43 Parson 2005. 76.
Many Japanese Americans returned to a different neighborhood than they had left. While some of the physical infrastructure from the prewar era was left, as Hillary Jenks has demonstrated, many noticed changes both in the structures and residents. Many found that their homes had been demolished, while others were shocked by how the neighborhood had so thoroughly become occupied by Black migrants. George Takei recalled his mother whispering in shock as they rode into Little Tokyo by streetcar, "So many black people here now." Though later activists would make a spatial claim to the enclave as an essentialized historic home for the Japanese American community, from the period between 1945 and the demolitions for the construction of Parker Center in 1950, the future of the enclave as a Japanese American space was far from determined. Before Japanese Americans could make this claim, they first had to reclaim their former storefronts from Little Tokyo / Bronzeville’s wartime occupants.

A combination of determined Japanese American businessmen and White property owners were invested in reasserting Japanese ownership and operation of many properties in Little Tokyo. Japanese American businessmen were clearly invested in regaining the leases they had lost during the war. According to one Black minister working in Little Tokyo, some paid “50, 75, 100, 200 percent more for the stores than when they left.” Additionally the racist biases of the White property owners led them to favor Japanese operators and tenants over Black ones. With these leases in hand, many Japanese operators tried to clear the buildings of Black tenants and reassert a Japanese spatial claim to the hotels and storefronts of Bronzeville / Little

45 Jenks 2008, 171.
47 I owe this insight to work done by Jenks (2008) and Scott Kurashige (2008) in their respective treatments on the Bronzeville / Little Tokyo period.
49 Ibid.
Tokyo. This non-violent reversion of Bronzeville into Little Tokyo was a sort of cold war between the two groups. Both groups occupied the same space, were committed to similar goals of integration in housing, and yet were fighting to maintain a communal presence in the downtown enclave.

Though Japanese Americans had begun to reestablish a claim to Little Tokyo, it was not a simple ‘reversion’ back to the community that it used to be for many reasons. As Jenks points out, much of the ethnic economy that had sustained Japanese American workers as well as the businesses of Little Tokyo had been lost during internment. Katsumi Kunitsugu, wife of future Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project Director, Kango Kunitsugu, and a prominent columnist in her own right, described the effects of this economic shift in the economy:

"Before the war, about 75 percent of all the produce that was produced in California was by Japanese Americans, but after the war all that changed...It was getting to be the era of the Nisei, and they tended to go into white-collar jobs. They didn’t want to continue the little mom-and-pop stores that their parents had—restaurants and things in Little Tokyo. So the character of Little Tokyo changed from a place where people lived and worked, to a place where it was just a business place. People didn’t live here anymore."

Katsumi Kunitsugu further elaborated that: "...after the war, it became pretty apparent that the Nisei weren’t going to stay in Little Tokyo. And then of course, with the Civil Rights Movement and all that, you could pretty much find housing anywhere that you could afford, instead of having to just settle for something in Little Tokyo or a clump of a ghetto in Southwest Los Angeles or uptown area."
While better opportunities in the suburbs facilitated the out-migration of Japanese American resettlers of Los Angeles into suburbs like Crenshaw, it was the demolitions to make way for Parker Center that sealed the death of the Bronzeville half of Bronzeville / Little Tokyo. Jenks estimates that up to 3,000 residents, who consisted many of the remaining Blacks were evicted as a full quarter of the enclave was cleared for the new Police Headquarters. Therefore while White property owners and aggressive Japanese American buyers did much to convert the enclave into a Japanese American cultural and retail center, White flight and the slum clearance policies of the state did much to facilitate Black and Japanese residential population’s outmigration from Little Tokyo / Bronzeville.

What would have happened to Little Tokyo if the racial state had not, as Jenks put it, “intervened spatially in the lives of enclaves communities in a discriminatory and materially destructive manner.” As Scott Kurashige’s study of the Westside Seinan / Crenshaw neighborhood demonstrated, Black - Japanese spatial coexistence was not an impossibility in this period. Spaces like the Holiday Bowl in Crenshaw and the Atomic Cafe in Little Tokyo demonstrated the possibility of positive, yet unstructured, interracial social spaces for Blacks and Japanese. What prefigured the development of Little Tokyo into a mainly commercial Japanese American community were macroeconomic forces in housing policy which favored private suburban development as well as the desire of Southern California Nisei to reestablish their lives outside of the crowded conditions of the decaying inner city.

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55 Jenks 2008, 207.
56 Kurashige 2008, 258. Kurashige goes in depth to talk about the politics of Blacks and Japanese Americans in Los Angeles suburbanization during the 1950s and 60s as well as the combined Japanese American and Black fight for housing integration.
58 Kurashige 2008, 256.
However in spite of this large-scale urban restructuring of residential patterns in Los Angeles, Little Tokyo continued being a residential community for low-income Issei bachelors and newer migrants from Mexico and Central America. As the redevelopment was busy molding Little Tokyo into a showroom for Japan in America or an essentialized symbol of Japanese American ethnicity, an older version of Japan in America lived on in the form of the Issei and Nisei bachelors. Mori (Mo) Nishida, an activist who founded the Little Tokyo Pioneer Center to provide social space and services for the Issei remembers: “you know Little Tokyo was a whole bunch of nomiyas (drinking establishments). So we were kind of a seedy neighborhood and a seedy community. All these bars and all these places that catered to single men...In those early days, up until the 60s, early 70s...The whole economy of the community was single men and men without families. Men were usually small business people and gardeners or people who ran businesses that catered to gardeners and single men.”

For these bachelors, the affordability, convenience and location of Little Tokyo made it a prime location. Clarence, a Nisei baker, originally from Hawaii, said he paid $68 a month for rent with “a good manager who cleans the room [and] charges cheap rent.” He goes on to enumerate other tangible benefits of living in Little Tokyo: “It’s safe here. It’s very convenient for transportation. Convenient for shopping. And very convenient for buying clothing, because really Japanese are very small and clothes are made to fit the people right here in Little Tokyo.” Therefore, for Clarence, the material convenience, not the cultural significance, of Little Tokyo

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60 Japanese word for bars / saloons / pubs, literally means drinking establishment.
61 Nishida, 2015.
62 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1238.
was most important to him as a resident. The only time he references why he as a person of Japanese ancestry enjoys living in Little Tokyo is the size of clothing sold in the stores.63

For men who never had the chance to marry or who never managed to settle down, the companionship of the bachelor community was another reason to stay in Little Tokyo. Clarence mentions, “All my friends are bachelors. We do a lot of things together, get a few drinks at the bar, we live together sometimes, go down to the racetracks…”64 Another 82 year-old Issei bachelor, Mr. Tatsumi talked about how he would often go down to the pool hall where many gathered to watch others play pool.65

Other Asian bachelors, not of Japanese descent, also felt a sense of community and belonging in the social world of Little Tokyo. Johnny Verrano, a Filipino-American resident of Little Tokyo summed up this sense of community best:

I like living here because I meet my friends here, we get together and have a few beers, few games, play pool, sometimes hear news from home, from Hawaii, where I originally come from, and they tell me what is happening from Hawaii. Real nice people, I’ve known them for a real long time and we always get along fine.66

Although not Japanese American by descent, Johnny Verrano certainly shared much in common with his Issei and Nisei neighbors. There must have been strong ties between him and his neighbors as an Asian bachelor with ties to Hawaii and his participation in a larger Little Tokyo culture of watering holes, pool halls, and men, who, in the words of Mr. Tatsumi “never had a chance to marry.”67

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63 Ibid.
64 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1238.
65 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1140. “それでまた玉塁に違って、ベストメントの玉塁いって、皆んな玉ついてるのを見て”
66 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1167.
67 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1140. “結婚するチャンスはなかった”
Of the three bachelors, only Mr. Tatsumi sees Little Tokyo’s importance and value in an overtly ethnicized lens. As a first generation immigrant to the United States, Mr. Tatsumi finds comfort in the ‘Japanese’ feeling of Little Tokyo, constantly repeating: “It feels like you return to Japan when you come here, however leaving here feels like you’ve gone to a completely different country.” He further adds that he finds pleasure in having so many Japanese shops around and seeing “Japanese faces.” He says “in Little Tokyo there are Japanese-owned stores, many Japanese. On top of that, even if we do not speak the same language, just to see Japanese faces satisfies my heart.” He further elaborates that “no matter where you are from, we are all happy to see and be among people who look like ourselves.”

Mr. Tatsumi’s statement that coming to Little Tokyo feels like “returning to Japan” and the comfort he feels in being around so many Japanese stores could be read as his nostalgia for food and products from home. However, based on his word, I believe that it is less what the stores sell than the faces of their owners which makes him feel at home. To refer to “Japanese” stores, he specifically uses the phrase: *nihonjin no stoia* which literally means: ‘stores owned by Japanese people’ instead of other words such as *wafū* (Japanese style) or *nihonteki* (typically Japanese) or *dentōteki* (traditional). For Mr. Tatsumi, then, the ethnic importance of Little Tokyo lies not so much in the ethnic products of the local stores, but rather in the fact that behind the check-out counter, after paying his bill he will see a familiar face looking back at him.

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68 Since the footage was shot around 1977-9, and he claims to be 82 at the time and that he immigrated when he was 17, I estimate that he immigrated to the United States around 1912-14.
69 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1140. “ちょっと日本に帰った気持ちですよ。ここへ来たら。ところが、ここから、帰っても、居業の国が行ったような気持ちがするですよ.”
70 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1140. “小東京は日本人のストアもあるし、日本人も多いし、それで同じ物が言わなかったも、日本人同士の顔を会う人がいる、それで心が満足になっています”
71 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1140. “我々どの人間でも私たちと同じく人間同士かを合わせのは愉快です”
In their own way, each bachelor articulates the value of Little Tokyo as a community that provided space for them to socialize, be among their own and feel at home. Though it is important not to blindly extrapolate a universal bachelor experience from these interviews, especially since the choice of documentary subject is not random or apolitical, I maintain that these interviews still provide a rare window into the voices of a group of people who rarely get to speak— or who are so often spoken for. From these videos, one gets a sense of the depth of emotional satisfaction that being in a bachelor community meant: how emotionally satisfying it was to be able to walk down the street and see familiar faces, grabbing a drink with friends, and playing basement pool in a space where you could just be yourself. For these bachelors, the importance of Little Tokyo as a symbol of Japanese American history, or as a bridge between Japan and America, or even as a place to eat good Japanese food is not as important to them as it is as a social space.

The loss of this community through the redevelopment projects seems acutely felt by each of these bachelors. Mr. Tatsumi said that “The say that there is a plan to build new housing...that it will only take a half year to two years. But honestly, I’m old, that project is good for the young, but I am at the age when I don’t know whether I will still be alive come sunrise tomorrow.” In Verrano’s interview, filmed at a local bar around 1977-8, the sense that time is running out is also present: “In fact right here, they are going to be tearing this down in two, three months. So after they tear this place down that’s it. And next door, there is a bar next door, they’re having a party today, but that is the last day and after they’ll close. There won’t be nobody coming over here. Eventually there won’t be no place for us to meet, except for on the

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12 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1140. “新しいハウスを作る計画があるけれども。。。1年半から二年間かかりません。ストレイートと私はお年寄りになったら、若い人はそれはええですよ。ところも朝上がって、この命があるかいないか年になった。。。”
street." In a way, for Clarence, time has already run out: "On the streets I used to walk and see my friends, but now they are all dispersed. And there is no way of contacting them, so I just meet one or two of my friends." 

In addition to the old-time Asian bachelors there were many Hispanic residents of the Little Tokyo low-income hotels. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hispanic residents of the hotels, like the bachelors found Little Tokyo to be a safe and convenient place to live. Obito cites the lack of crime as one of the main factors for his living there: "I feel very much at ease here. Other parts of the city I see there is robberies, people are being mugged, I don’t have to worry about that here." Alphonso also found Little Tokyo to be a safe place to live, but not because of the absence of street violence, but instead because of the absence of active police patrols. Formerly a resident of Boyle Heights on the Eastside, what he called the “hunting grounds” of the police he recounts that: “the police would look at my arms and my face and my hair and I would be too Mexican-looking and that’s why they were so suspicious.” He says: “The police stopped one too many times, so I got angry and moved out.” For these residents then, Little Tokyo was a a place safe from both street violence and police patrols.

Location was another factor that Obito and Alfonso cite as a reason they would like to stay in Little Tokyo. Obito recounts: “You have some Mexican people living here because they work in the restaurants. I do not think all of them are particularly fond of Little Tokyo, some of them are...Some of them work in the downtown area, some of them work in Little Tokyo and it is convenient for them.” Alfonso has similar comments about Little Tokyo: “I like to take walks
here, it is close to the Central Market. Even in case of [a] strike, I can walk to my job in the 
garment industry.” Access to public transit and walkability take on further significance when we 
understand that car-ownership was likely out of reach for these immigrant workers. In the words 
of Alfonso: “I do not have a car because I can not afford the insurance or parking, so I use the 
bus.”

Little Tokyo also provided these new Hispanic immigrants an important social space. 
Reflecting back on life in the Sun Hotel before its demolition, Alfonso remembers: “We were all 
really a family. We would share news of Mexico, eat together, and almost everyone would play 
Mexican music.” For Obito, he found enjoyment many of the same things that the Asian 
bachelors enjoyed: “I like to play billiards. Some places where you can go with your friends and 
get a couple drinks, socialize...Little Tokyo has been an entertaining place. We have a lot of 
places where you go to talk and play games, play billiards.” Once again, the bachelor-oriented 
economy of Little Tokyo, its nomiyas, late night restaurants and billiards rooms provided an 
enjoyable, safe, and affordable space for immigrants, both new and old.

Of course there are limitations to the testimony of Alfonso and Obito. Since they were 
members of Little Tokyo People’s Rights Organization (LTPRO) and so their selection as 
documentary subjects is not random. Further as many tapes demonstrate, there were many Latina 
women in these hotels, as we can see from meetings with residents and CRA representatives.
Their voices are harder to hear - literally because the audio of the tapes from that community 
meeting is so damaged as to be rendered unintelligible. One woman, who worked as a maid and

78 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1160.
79 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1160. “Todos éramos una familia, verdad. Todos teníamos 
noticias de México y comíamos allí y casi todos tocamos discos y música de México.”
80 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. 1472.
later in a bank seems mainly concerned about finding work and supporting her son and family back in Mexico. How people like her related to this homosocial culture of bars and billiards is hard to imagine, suffice it to say that it would have been a different story. Nevertheless, these testimonies are still valuable in trying to understand the meaning of Little Tokyo to a group of people who are so often spoken for in the literature on Little Tokyo redevelopment.

For the newly suburbanized Japanese Americans, in this period (1950-1969), Little Tokyo rose to prominence as an important community center. Little Tokyo, though no longer the population center for the Japanese American families in the post-war period, certainly remained the communal center. A 1963 survey of Little Tokyo indicated its centrality to the community by containing a critical mass of churches, temples, ethnic credit institutions, community institutions such as the Japanese American Citizens’ League (JACL) and professional services.

In the words of Mike Murase, a prominent activist in the anti-redevelopment struggle, these institutions differentiated Little Tokyo from the newer suburban communities of Japanese Americans: “We saw Little Tokyo as a center that had a critical mass of stores...that we gravitated for...it was the gateway, so most people ended up here [Little Tokyo], not just to live here, but this is the place where we found professionals. If you needed a lawyer or a hairstylist or a dentist, whatever. So my first doctors all practiced in Little Tokyo.”

Yoshimura also mentions similar draws of Little Tokyo as a “hub” for the community even after the breakdown of residential segregation, “People started establishing families in these different enclaves that were outside of Little Tokyo, but they kept coming back for the food or

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81 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. 1199. “Trabajar para sostener a mi hijo. Ayudar a mi padre y mi hijo.”
82 LTRA, General Plan for Little Tokyo, 1963. 10. Lois Crouch Papers Box 24, Folder 8.
83 Murase, 2015.
their temple or church or the legal help you could get in Little Tokyo, those types of things were still here.”

These recollections are corroborated by a 1969 report to the city council on Little Tokyo redevelopment, which indicated that Little Tokyo had 80 professional offices which provided medical, legal and financial services, 27 restaurants, and 27 cultural institutions.

Little Tokyo’s status as a hub and center of the Southern California Japanese American community was overtly manifested in the form of ethnic festivals such as *hanamatsuri* (Buddha’s birthday) and Nisei Week. Yoshimura remembers the excitement of the *hanamatsuri* festival when all the temples would gather together for a service and that afterwards: “then we’d all get these little tickets, you know those tickets that come in a roll. And they would let us loose, in Little Tokyo and we could go to certain stores on first street and cash the tickets in for like a snow cone or a piece of candy.”

The Nisei Week celebration during the summer remained another important community wide event which included: cultural exhibitions, a beauty pageant, a parade featuring street dancing, and a carnival. Both Yoshimura and Murase capture the excitement of Little Tokyo during the carnival season. Yoshimura said, for a teen in the in 60s:

> Once a year, everybody would get together in Little Tokyo for the carnivals and it was crazy. It was so huge. You could go there with your parents and say that you were going to meet them later and never see them the whole evening, because there was so much and because there were so many people there...

In addition to being a time for the community as a whole to come together, she also mentioned the specific appeal for teenager: “So you know, the boys would win animals and give it to the girls- and you would walk around and it would be a status thing.” Further, this was also a time

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84 Yoshimura. 2015.
85 Report to the City Council Accompanying the Redevelopment Plan for the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project, 1969. 7.
86 Niiya 1993. 265.
when gang rivalries between “eastside” Boyle Heights and “southside” Crenshaw gangs would be fought out. She remembers: “So it was this whole macho thing, but I remember feeling very attracted to it, think, wow this is very fascinating, or, wow - those guys from the eastside are really cute.” Reflecting back, she mused: “Possibilities were bigger maybe, I don’t know.”

In a similar vein, Murase muses: “I came here [Little Tokyo]... with my friends to go to whatever festivals or Nisei Week... There would be people from the West-side or from Silverlake, or Pasadena or other places. So we would get a chance to meet girls from different areas around town, it was just a fun time.”

In contrast to those who resided in Little Tokyo, the newly suburbanized Japanese Americans, the historic and symbolic residents of Little Tokyo had a strictly ethnicized relationship with the space of Little Tokyo. In coming to Little Tokyo monthly or even weekly, Little Tokyo was an important ethnic space where they could access professional services, Japanese groceries, and physically own the space as they enacted a larger Japanese American community during the ethnic festivals. In the words of a Gardena resident and activist, Lillian Nakano, “Little Tokyo as I see it, as long it has been here, seems to be the center of the Japanese American community... When they had the major festivals - it is Little Tokyo. When you say the Japanese American community - it is Little Tokyo.”

This discursive reconstruction of Little Tokyo from a place where Japanese Americans had lived once to the Japanese American community itself is an important legacy of the redevelopment period and reflects fundamental shifts in which the self was being conceptualized in the 1960s and 1970s.

87 Yoshimura, 2015
88 Murase, 2015.
89 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1148.
Chapter 1: Little Tokyo and the Formation of Japanese American Identity 1960s-70s

In the 2005 mural “Home is Little Tokyo” (fig. 2) was unveiled to the public. The mural is replete with images of intergenerational continuity, Mount Fuji and cherry blossoms, Japanese American Taiko, ethnic basketball leagues, activists from the 1970s, hints of the 40s Bronzeville Jazz culture, as well as traditional dancing, and celebratory mochi making it represents the diversity and totality of the Japanese American community. Its text in English declares: “Little Tokyo is a Gathering Place and Destination for Japanese American community and culture. Little Tokyo is a Spiritual Place. Little Tokyo is a complete Living & Thriving 100 year old community, Little Tokyo is a bridge to Downtown Community.” In Japanese the text says “Los Angeles’s Little Tokyo is our heart’s furusato (ancestral / spiritual home).”


What may seems like an innocuous and natural move to memorialize a historic home, is actually the sum total of rhetorical and tactical moves used by Nisei and later Sansei to make a claim to the development, economic, architectural and institutional of Little Tokyo during the
1960s and 70s. It was in this time when a seemingly innocuous term, ‘Little Tokyo community’ had to be articulated, formalized - in community redevelopment organizations such as the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association (1963-1969) or the Little Tokyo Community Development Advisory Committee (1969-2013) or in serve the people and anti-redevelopment organizations such as Little Tokyo People’s Rights Organization (LTPRO), and populated with Issei residents, small business operators, economic elites within the Japanese American community, ministers, activists, Black and Hispanic residents and the larger community of Southern California Japanese Americans.

At the heart of this move to reconceptualize Little Tokyo as a ‘historic home’ or furusato are two complementary moves one was the desire of Nisei community leaders and business operators to maintain control over the enclave by making racially distinct claims on the space of Little Tokyo and the other was the birth of identity politics in the late 60s amongst the younger generation of Japanese Americans.

In this chapter, I will focus on the identity shift of these Sansei activists. For Sansei activists, living through a time when history work, knowing and rediscovering history was a precondition to consciousness which itself was the precondition for organizing, Little Tokyo played a crucial role. As both a site of memory and as a place where third-world institutions could be established because of the needs within the space, Little Tokyo played a crucial dual role for the Sansei activists. On the one hand it provided the historical weight and gravitas of authority that made it fertile ground for historical-conscious based work while also providing the socially needy population of workers and residents that gave that this newfound consciousness work to do.
The Socio-demographic Roots of Sansei Identity Politics

In order to understand some of the impetus behind this shift towards identity politics, it is useful to look at work done by Nicholson on the rise of Black Power and Women’s politics in the 60s and 70s. She argues that Black Power came to prominence during a time when other forms of identity were no longer able to fully address what Du Bois called the double consciousness. Du Bois described this condition in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folks*: “One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

For Black Americans, there were two ways to understand and present the self, on the one hand they could argue for the distinct racial characteristics of Blacks, a color-based essentialism, or they could emphasize their Americanness. However, as Nicholson argues, as long as Black leaders saw the greatest battles as being against segregation in the 30s, 40s and 50s, the presentation of Blacks as Americans won over presentations of Blacks as distinctly African.

While by the 1960s this anti-segregation strategy had addressed many of the needs of many working class and middle class Blacks, this was only one part of the struggle, “there was also the widespread belief in African American difference and inferiority. Cultural challenges were required to overcome this barrier.” An alliance of poor disaffected Blacks and recently educated youth would begin a movement that attempted to “describe the differences exemplified by poor black Americans in positive terms…” What facilitated this alliance, according to Nicholson was the increasing class diversity within Black neighborhoods which made an

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identification on the part of the students with the less advantaged within their community less paternalistic than some critics such as Adolph Reed\textsuperscript{95} may have suggested.\textsuperscript{96}

Nicholson also points out to sexism within the academy as another catalyst for the growth of cultural politics in the late 60s and 70s. Nicholson points to the fact that the 1960s witnessed an incredible growth in higher education, for women. As students who had gained entrance to universities based on merit and individual accomplishments, it was jarring to confront gender barriers which persisted in both the classroom and activist spaces.\textsuperscript{97}

Many of these psychological and demographic factors were at play for the Southern California Sansei, especially those growing up on the “Westside” in Seinan. Laura Pulido indicates that the Southern California Japanese American population occupied an ambiguous class position, pointing to high rates of Nikkei\textsuperscript{98} female employment in manufacturing and clerical work and Nikkei men’s self employment in industries such as produce, nurseries and gardening. From these statistics, she concludes:

> Given such a fragmented economic background, we can see why Japanese American activists did not develop a politics grounded in either workers’ or class struggle. Instead their politics focused on the racism that the Asian American community as a whole faced with a particular emphasis on the disempowered and economically marginalized sectors of their population.\textsuperscript{99}

This observation is corroborated by my oral history interviews. As Yoshimura put it, “East of Jefferson boulevard was [where] fathers would wear uniforms. The other side of

\textsuperscript{95} Adolph Reed suggested that, “Black unity, elevated to an end in itself, became an ideology promoting consolidation of the management elite’s expanded power over the black population.” Reed, 2002. 39-66. Quoted in Nicholson 2008. 177.

\textsuperscript{96} Nicholson 2008. 136, 177.

\textsuperscript{97} Nicholson 2008. 170.

\textsuperscript{98} Japanese term for Japanese descent (日系)

\textsuperscript{99} Pulido 2006, 52.
Exposition boulevard, the fathers wore suits.”¹⁰⁰ This ambiguous class position of the community as a whole served as the basis for a cross-class racial understanding of identity, which would give both the street youth and the college educated segments a common ground experience that they could eventually ground in Little Tokyo. As Murase put it, “the Asian American Movement, brought together the high achievers- the ones that went to college and the ones that we would call like street people. People in the gangs and into the drugs. And [we] probably found commonality about everyone being Asian American...the idea of coming back to our community.”¹⁰¹ Nishida, much closer to the at-risk youth segment of the movement, was annoyed by the ‘social work ethic’ of the college students but also admits, “the struggle to serve our people...that was a unifying thing- to serve the people.”¹⁰²

Unprecedented access to the academy further served to radicalize the “high-achieving segment of the community.” In the prewar period, for many Nisei, getting an advanced degree did not translate into financial success due to the segregated labor market. As one Nisei barber put it, “I had quite a few young people who graduated from Stanford and had a beautiful background as far as education was concerned, but were they able to get a job - no! There was no job period! So many people just stayed on in the farms. I never wanted to be a barber, but what could I do?”¹⁰³ Yoshimura remembers an Issei bachelor who graduated from UC Berkeley, but never found good work and ended up working in the produce industry and residing in a Little Tokyo. She reminisced: “But whenever it was his choice to dress, he always wore a suit, a tie and a white shirt.”¹⁰⁴ This would change after the demise of segregation in the post war period.

¹⁰⁰ Yoshimura 2015.
¹⁰¹ Murase 2015.
¹⁰² Nishida 2015.
¹⁰³ Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. 1226.
¹⁰⁴ Yoshimura 2015.
The Japanese American Sansei experienced major access to higher education as a result of the 1960 California Master Plan to provide tuition free education to all qualifying residents of the state\textsuperscript{105} and because they were the first generation of Japanese Americans for whom a college degree could be translated into class mobility on a large scale.

However, at the university, many were surprised by the overwhelming whiteness of what they saw. Yoshimura remembers that at her time at Cal State Long Beach a white peer came up to her and began staring, saying “I’m sorry I know this is rude, but I’ve never seen one of you before.” Yoshimura laughed off his behavior as indicative of the overwhelming whiteness of the campus in comparison to Seinan/Crenshaw and the fact that he was from “Orange County.”\textsuperscript{106} At UCLA, Murase remembers how the “only frame of reference” for understanding people like him was through statements such as “Oh we used to have a housekeeper.”\textsuperscript{107} In this way the university as a predominantly White institution was alienating to many Asian, Latino and Black students and provided fertile ground for disidentification with not only the universities, but the larger institutional structures within society that they represented. This would dramatically erupt in the Bay Area with student strikes at SF State and UC Berkeley by the Third World Liberation Front in 1968-9 as students demanded a wide array of curricular and institutional reform.\textsuperscript{108}

\textit{Recovering (from) History}

For Sansei activists, an age cohort that had largely grown up away from the segregated Little Tokyo, and who had as a cohort been born immediately after the internment, many had a

\textsuperscript{105} Holy 1961, 15.
\textsuperscript{106} Yoshimura 2015.
\textsuperscript{107} Murase 2015.
complicated relationship towards their own ethnicity and history. Raised during a time when they were structurally integrated into society but still persistently racialized as ‘other,’ at a time when there was no vocabulary for talking about the interstitial space of ‘other,’ nor any histories speaking to an experience of otherness, many young Sansei felt a strong sense of alienation. The fight for ethnic studies and rediscovery of Japanese American, Asian American and the history of ‘Third World People’ as a whole provided new language and context for their experiences. And it is from this shift in identity that Little Tokyo was discursively reconstructed from simply being a place of the Japanese American past in Los Angeles but became a device for perpetuating a sense of continuity with the past. It is precisely these shifts in identity that transformed Little Tokyo from simply another historical site that was formerly occupied by Japanese Americans, to an essentialized historical symbol of Japanese American ethnicity deserving of protection and memorialization.

An amateur film by Qris Yamashita, a Sansei graphic designer is a prime example of what these shifts in identity meant to young Sansei and how they related to culture work and activism of the 70s. At the same time the staff at Visual Communications was documenting the redevelopment of Little Tokyo (1976-1979), they produced their “Hidden Treasures” series one of the first film series that attempted to capture the diversity of Asian American voices.109 One of these films, Samsara, a 20-minute short by amateur filmmaker and graphic designer, Qris Yamashita provides a fascinating window into the mindset of Japanese American Sansei in the 1970s and how interconnected their goals of social justice, cultural reaffirmation, and historical awakening were intertwined.

109 Abe Ferrer Personal communication. 
https://fromthevovault.wordpress.com/2013/10/15/archives-month-abraham-ferrer/
Set in Los Angeles, much of the drama of the semi-fictional short film centers around two twenty something year old female cousins, one Japanese - Yuki and the other Japanese American - Faye. The plot of the film is relatively simple: the film begins with them mourning the loss of their grandmother, an Issei woman, through conversations with each other and with their grandfather both learn what it means to be Japanese American and resolve to reconnect to their heritage by visiting Manzanar, a wartime concentration camp.

Early on in the film, Faye and her cousin have disagreements over what it means to be Japanese versus being Japanese American. One prominent theme is the idea of old Japan symbolized by their grandmother, bachan and new Japan symbolized by Yuki. Yuki explains to her cousin “Japan is very different from the time when jichan [grandpa] and bachan [grandma] left. Especially the big city like Tokyo.” She goes on to say “when I talked to obachan’s friends, I noticed some of the words are quite old.” Faye takes offense to this snapping back “You mean like they’re still living in the Meiji (1868-1912) period right?” Faye powers through her cousin’s protests and lets out her frustrations with not being ‘Japanese’ enough: “It just seems like a lot of Japanese from Japan kinda look down on us Japanese Americans because either we don’t speak the language or we don’t speak it right.”

On the side of things, however, Faye complains about the difficulty of assimilation into American society. She complains to Yuki: “A lot of Americans think that being American means being white...that’s the kind of stuff that gets me mad, because it’s those kind of things that have been controlling our lives and it’s the kind of thing that needs to be stopped.” Summing up her frustrations of her liminal identity, Faye tells Yuki: “You can’t imagine how hard it is, when you

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110 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1293.
111 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1293.
112 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1293.
don’t know your history in America, you don’t know your culture in Japan and you’re not White!" \(^{113}\) In this film, Faye articulates one of the fundamental contradictions growing up Japanese American in the racial matrix of Southern California: the disconnect between promises of individual fulfillment in American society and the persistent racial encoding of their bodies as an embodiment of an a-temporal othered “Japanese-ness.”

The sense that Japanese Americans were not true Americans was a pervasive form of racism that structured the discursive context in which Japanese Americans sought ways to express their identity. Some Sansei youth interviewed by political scientist Don Nakanishi in 1973 remembered being blamed by their peers for the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Others complained about being seen as foreigners in their own country: “If you have a camera and go to Disneyland they’ll think you’re a tourist.” Another summed up their frustrations as: “Americans tend to think of Japanese Americans as Japanese, which means that you could have come over yesterday for all they know.” \(^{114}\) This perceptions were not unfounded, in a 1973 article describing the redevelopment struggles, *Civic Center News*, a downtown newspaper opined “Most of us round-eyed Americans tend to consider Japanese Americans to be closer in spirit to their Japanese cousins than to their American brothers.” \(^{115}\)

Although the period under study (1969-1980) is relatively recent, one has to remember that it was still a different time with a different racial logic. Though being challenged by young movement activists, the visuality of race, and the conflation of how one looks, in this case eye

\(^{113}\) Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1308.

\(^{114}\) Nakanishi 1973. 38.

shape, with essentialized cultural traits, was a pervasive form of discursive racism that shaped how Sanseis located themselves within history and society.

This racial encoding of their bodies as ‘other’ and ‘foreign’ clashed with the strong integrationist mindset of their parents and the whiteness of school curricula. Mike Murase reminisced about the difficulty of knowing oneself when the history taught at school only celebrated the accomplishments of “White America.” Though his middle school was majority, Asian, Hispanic and Black, Murase recalled, “The history is all about the accomplishment of White America and the westward expansion and all the inventor and this other stuff. And very little was taught to us about the Black experience, slavery or Native Americans or Asian Americans- nothing about Asian Americans.”116 As one Sansei put it, “Young Sansei like me felt void of a sense of history at a time when history defined identity.”117

Sansei lacking a sense of history in school would not find it at home as many Nisei tried to forget the experience of Internment.118 Instead, the Nisei encouraged their children to assimilate into American society. As Japanese American National Museum (JANM) curator Karen Ishizuka said, “They [the Nisei] believed that sustained model citizenry would provide retroactive evidence that it was “they” [the U.S. government]...and not “we” who had been wrong.”119

Despite Faye’s insecurities of not feeling adequately ‘Japanese’ or ‘American’ enough, the film itself is a visual celebration of Japanese American culture. In the first scene, when the cousins reminisce about their grandmother in a suburban living room the decor features a

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116 Murase 2015.
118 Ishizuka 2006. 6.
119 Ishizuka 2006. 7.
butsudan - shrine for the Buddha, a table draped in a cloth with Japanese crests on them, a hanging scroll behind the sofa and kokeshi dolls - Japanese wooden bobble-heads. This visualization of the interior home reveals what parts of Japan and Japanese culture were maintained in the transfer from Japan to America.

Additionally the setting of the second scene, when Faye and Yuki argue about what it means to be Japanese American vs Japanese, is significant. It takes place at the Holiday Bowl, an important Japanese American cultural landmark. Though outwardly appearing just like any other 60s “Googie” bowling lane and diner, according to Kurashige it represented the unique cultural hybridity of the Westside Japanese American population. The menu featured Chinese food alongside “Down-home Japanese and Black soul food” for a “one of a kind menu.”

Another scene is shot at a Japanese American community picnic, with children playing games, parents sharing picnic food and a performance of Japanese Americans embracing a new form of Taiko (Japanese drum) playing. This surprises the Japanese cousin Yuki, who is not used to seeing Taiko performed outside the festival context:

Yuki: Faye is that taiko music?
Faye: Yeah they always play it at this picnic around the community
Yuki: But in Japan taiko is only played at the obon festival.
Faye: Oh well they do it at obon here too.
Yuki: But I’ve never seen taiko played by a group, I thought people have to study for many years to master it, but everybody up there looks young. It just doesn’t seem right.

In this scene we see a conscious attempt by a Japanese American filmmaker to demonstrate the differences between a received cultural tradition and how the Sansei attempted to reinterpret that

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120 Kurashige 2008. 257.
121 Kurashige 2008. 257.
122 Buddhist summer festival celebrating the ancestors. Taiko drums are used as accompaniments to the circle dancing.
123 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1298.
tradition for themselves in the search for an Asian American identity. As Hideyo Konagaya, a scholar of taiko performance put it, Sansei youth “search[ed] for their ethnic identity using Japanese traditions as a foundation.” Yet in doing so altered them into a medium of expressing their own frustrations with the dominant society: “The resonance the drumming worked as a metaphor for breaking out of silence and releasing long-suppressed voices of anger. Sansei physically acted out their resistance against inequality and injustice in American society.”

In this film, both implicitly and explicitly Yamashita highlights unique facets of what it means to be Japanese American, how much of it is Japanese derived, and how much of it comes from a specific experience of living in America. When Japan is referenced it is fragmentary, partial and imagined - the remnants of a homeland that had ceased to exist in the rapid modernization that had taken over the country.

This liminality between Japan and America causes an existential crisis in Faye who questions why she “didn’t spend more time with bachan?” She agonizes that she never got to know her grandma, fretting: “I guess I was too busy to hear. Busy being cool and accepted. For what reasons I’m not even sure.” She fully breaks down asking herself: “I look for myself but find no one there. Who am I? Where am I? What am I? And if anyone cares, who does? I have to find a place to begin cuz right now the future is so unclear.”

As this scene demonstrates, conceptualizations of identity in the late 1960s and 1970s were undergoing radical changes. For minoritized individuals, it was not enough to be accepted into society as an individual, but rather, it became essential to understand the totality the history that structured one’s position in society as a precondition for transcending one’s individual

125 Visual Communications Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1312.
marginalization. Therefore, it was not enough to simply be: “cool and accepted,” but rather one had to know one’s place in relation to much larger structures of society and history.

Faye begins her journey to self-recovery when she and Yuki meets her friend Steve, a Little Tokyo People’s Rights Organization (LTPRO) activist, at the community picnic featuring the taiko performance. In a blending of fiction and non-fiction that characterizes this film, Steve the LTPRO activist is played by Steve Tasukawa, a prominent LTPRO member who lead the LTPRO delegation during the city council meeting on stopping the evictions of the Sun Hotel.

When asked by Faye what he has been up to he tells her about LTPRO’s work and the general needs in the community. Steven tells her that he had “become aware of the fact that Asians have special problems that we can only solve.” When asked by Faye “how did this all start” he responds: “Well back in the 60s when I was going to highschool and college there were a lot of things happening because of the civil rights movement and people were speaking out about a lot of the racial injustices in the nation...And it was all because of people challenging a lot of the things they never challenged before.” Citing specifically the Black Power movement and the Asian American anti-war movement he says: “a lot of Asian...started examining their own lives and rediscovering their own history and their own identity. And that made us more aware of our own communities and the needs that we have.” Upon hearing this, Faye realizes that the social movements were “directly connected” to the work being done “in Little Tokyo.”

As Steve mentions in the film, the academic ‘rediscovery’ of history and identity was directly linked to a renewed academic and political interest in historic Asian American communities. In this process of recovering histories and historical subjects, activists also began

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126 Visual Communications Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1298.
recovering spaces of history: the Little Tokyo’s, the Nihonmachi's, central valley farms and the concentration camps. In a ‘Night of Unity’ between the activists and residents of the Sun Hotel, one LTPRO activist opined: “For some of us who have been fighting for ethnic studies...we] find that the very history that we want to study can be erased by this process of destruction of our communities.”

However, it was Little Tokyo whose micro-level shifts reflected general trends in Los Angeles urbanism as well as the Japanese American ethnic economy, which allowed it to serve as an appropriate metonym for Japanese America itself - what Kats Kunitsugu called “A small town set in the middle of a metropolis.” Therefore, in addition to becoming a historic resource for the community, the history of Little Tokyo increasingly became the history of the Japanese American community during this process of recovery. In Jim Matsuoka’s 1969 account of “The Japanese in Los Angeles,” Japanese American history in Los Angeles is narrated almost exclusively as the history of Little Tokyo. In his account, the highly integrated economic networks and segregation that sustained Little Tokyo become an appropriate metaphor for a sense of community in the prewar era while integration and dissolution of the enclave reflected the fragmented nature of a community recovering from internment.

Through his history, Matsuoka represents Little Tokyo as both a historic and present continuing metaphor for the larger Japanese American community. In the end, he opines: “What is true of the vestigial presentation of Little Tokyo is also true of the community at large...If you drive into ‘Little Tokyo’ today you will see the ghost of what was once our community.”

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it, "The history of Little Tokyo is a history of our people. I think it’s important for us to take pride in being Nikkei, and continue building the kind of community where people can feel a sense of dignity in determining for ourselves what our destiny will be."\(^{131}\)

This connection: between past and present, between past wrongs and the current redevelopment battles is bridged by a conversation Faye has with her grandfather. After their visit to the LTPRO office in Little Tokyo where they learn about their organizing work, Faye and Yuki run into their grandfather, whose voice is used to connect the past and present in order to propose a resolution to Faye’s internal crisis. When asked about what he thinks of LTPRO, he connects their present activism to past injustices: "Well I don’t know too much about those young people in LTPRO. But I think they made some connections with the past. This isn’t the first time that the Japanese American community had been broken community."\(^{132}\) After recounting the pain of internment to Faye and Yuki, he tells Faye: "It’s important to know yourself as Sansei. It’s important for you and generations to come. You can’t ignore your history. It’s all part of you." He then mentions that there will be a Manzanar pilgrimage soon "And I think it would be a good idea if you two went."\(^{133}\) The film ends with Faye and Yuki at an actual Manzanar pilgrimage, seeing the remains of barracks, participating in a Buddhist ceremony and dancing the *Tanko Bushi* - coal miner’s dance - at the camp.\(^{134}\) In visiting the concentration camp of her grandfather Faye’s internal crisis of identity is resolved and she has come to know herself.

The centrality of rediscovering the Internment experience as a way to become a conscious individual as well as resolve an internal crisis of identity demonstrates the centrality of

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\(^{131}\) Murase, 1983. 30.

\(^{132}\) Visual Communications Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1293.

\(^{133}\) Visual Communications Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1293.

\(^{134}\) Visual Communications Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1316.
the Internment for Sansei seeking identity. Rediscovery of the Internment experience was essential to forming a cross-generational Japanese American identity and personalizing the political battles over space in Little Tokyo.

For many, the Internment had been a present absence in their lives: something that they knew had existed yet not known what it truly meant. Don Nakanishi in his monograph on the rediscovery of the internment experience by the Sansei said: “It was not uncommon for third-generation Sansei children who grew up during the post-war decades of the 1950s and 1960s to have acquired only the most basic facts about their elders’ Internment experience.”

This is reflected in many of the Sansei interviewed by Janice Tanaka in her 1999 documentary *When You’re Smiling*. One reminisced: “People would always say oh I hadn’t seen them since camp or I knew them before camp...I always heard it so much I never thought about what it was.” Another remembered a white scout leader apologizing for the Internment experience and that when they asked their parents “they wouldn’t give me a straight answer.” In a dramatic example, one remembered that her sister, a student at UC Santa Cruz saw her aunts and grandmother in lecture slides in a history class, she borrowed the slide to make a christmas card for her family and who “were upset because they didn’t want to be reminded of that time.”

Oftentimes, finding out the extent of the incarceration and that it had happened to family members was an overwhelming emotional experience. Yoshimura remembers the first time she talked to her father about internment: “At first he was reticent, but once he started talking, he talked until 3 o’clock in the morning that night...It was really amazing. I got angry. I cried. It was

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135 Nakanishi, 2009. 61.
137 Takezawa in Zhou and Gatewood 2000. 302. Takezawa's monograph on the redress movement contains many interesting anecdotes from Sansei and Nisei on their reactions to the internment experience.
just a real heavy thing.” However, these emotionally charged revelations allowed for generational reconciliation and understanding between the internees and their descendants. Kats Kunitugu, a Nisei, reflecting on the redress movement, said: “Well, I think I really hand it to the Sansei activists that didn't let what happened in the past bother them. Of course, they didn't experience it, so they didn't have the first-hand experience of discrimination. But still...to have done all that is a real accomplishment. And I really admire the people who did that.”

Yoshimura remembers how talking about the camps changed her relationship with her father, “I felt like I could say a lot to him...He worked at a bank so he was very conservative in a certain way, but he really understood what I was trying to do: the movement, my involvement, the decisions I made. He really understood it in a deep way.” Moments like these: emotionally charged exchanges that merged past political wrongs with personalized family history bridged generational divides within Nikkei families and reinforced the idea of a unified ‘Japanese American community.’

The rediscovery of the camps was therefore essential in providing the basis of a semantic shift from an individualized ‘I’ to a collective Japanese American ‘our.’ This is best captured by Karen Ishizuka’s reflections on curating an exhibition for the Japanese American National Museum on internment in 1994. Ishizuka speaks to the dual notion of recovering history and recovering from history. She writes:

The intertwining of the notions of recovering history and recovering from it suggest that history is a personal concern, that history matters, that our past helps make sense of the present and together impacts the future, and that there is a collectivity of experience that turns ‘me’ and ‘mine’ into ‘us’ and ‘ours’ and makes us responsible for each other.141

138 Yoshimura 2015.
140 Yoshimura 2015.
141 Ishizuka 2006. 184.
Ishizuka’s metaphor—of at once recovering history and recovering from history—is essential to understanding why Sansei activists were so invested in the Asian American Movement broadly and Little Tokyo redevelopment in particular. If history was the device through which a unified notion of community could be created, then it was Little Tokyo and its struggling Issei residents that provided concrete living proof of that history. The fading facades of Little Tokyo businesses along with the elderly Issei who populated the transient hotels served as proof that this history was real and that its consequences still mattered. In a 1976 scathing critique of redevelopment, Dwight Chuman sums up these feelings: “Little Tokyo today stands mute testimony to this long history of oppression and suffering in the hearts and minds of many Japanese Americans...Little Tokyo is not unlike the old, time- worn Issei it first provided shelter for at the turn of the century.”

The title of the film, Samsara, itself reflects this new understanding of history. Samsara, originates from the Buddhist idea of reincarnation and the cycle of birth and death. The activists, though perhaps not thinking in these terms, located themselves within a cycle where Japanese Americans were perpetually oppressed and that to be Japanese American was to bear the weight of past generations of Japanese Americans. This idea of generational continuity, that the past never quite dies, served as the main impetus for the flourishing of activism, academics and culture in this period.

Cyclical history is a very apt way to understand how activists located themselves within history. Predicated on a form of racism that visually encoded their bodies as forever different provided resonance to Faye’s grandfather’s admonition that, “You can’t ignore your history, it’s

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a part of you.” The rhetorical comparison of evictions for the New Otani Hotel in Little Tokyo with wartime evacuation provided a particularly potent metaphor. As one activists put it during a speech for “Unity Night” aimed to boost moral for LTPRO and their allies:

A lot people have found that what’s happening in Little Tokyo right now is just an extension and continuation of the same kind of racism and oppression that we’ve faced for a long time. And there are older people who took the parallels of being forced off their farms from the Alien Land Laws in the 30s and from being thrown into the concentration camps in 1942, and people are seeing how this is another extension of what we’ve been forced to go through as we are forced out of our community in Little Tokyo.  

At another rally, after the LTPRO activists were thrown out of city hall, another speaker said:

This struggle is not a new struggle. I think it goes back to when our folks before us came to this country. Every since they came here it’s been a struggle for our people, building the Japanese towns, fight for our rights as people... Our history is that of a history of struggle. 

In an article for Roots: An Asian American Reader, Eddie Wong, who worked with Visual Communications and was active in both documenting and fighting redevelopment connected the past and present economic organization of the enclave:

It’s [the economic situation of Japanese Americans] like a cycle going back to the 30’s and the pre-war days again, where the Japanese community is conservative and imperialist because the very structure in the community...are being run and controlled by the Japanese in Japan.

In a scathing critique of redevelopment, Dwight Chuman situated redevelopment’s callousness to Japanese American community demands as part of an age-old story:

The rebirth of Little Tokyo has been transformed into a slow and painful death. In a replay of an oft -repeated story, the interests of the Japanese American community in

143 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1293.
144 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1468.
145 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc. 1203.
Little Tokyo, and symbolically everywhere have once again taken a backseat to a new set of priorities and interests.¹⁴⁷

_Hito Hata: Raise the Banner_, the first feature length fictional film by Visual Communications and first feature length film done by an all Asian American production team, takes this sense of cyclical history to another level. It follows an Issei protagonist Mako who lives in a low-income hotel under the shadow of eviction. Throughout the film, comparisons are made between his present situation and the past. Nisei week is shown in two temporal moments: the present (1979) and in the 1930s ‘heyday’ of Little Tokyo. The pans of cheering Japanese Americans occupying the streets of the enclave in two moments separated by 40 years reinforces a sense of intergenerational Japanese American presence and continuity in the enclave (fig. 3). The threat of removal is compared with being relocated during the war, while fighting the evictions is compared to the labor struggles of the Japanese railroad workers. In a particularly creative parallel between past and present, the sole Japanese American CRA board member is compared to the Japanese American railroad worker’s representative to management- who profits from his bilingual English / Japanese ability while selling out and lying to his fellow workers.

The early 1970s were a time when later scholars writing in the 1980s-1990s would look back on as the beginning of the breakdown of Fordism. However, for activists living through this time, history was not viewed as undergoing a fundamental rupture, but was rather conceived of as cyclical. In their radical critique of power, the activists were not saying that the systems of power and domination that they were confronting were fundamentally different from previous structures of oppression mobilized against their community. Rather, they were making the claim that these seeds of post-Fordism were the latest iteration of a continual battle against racism. This discrepancy opens onto larger differences between scholars of economics and scholars of race. While those who study race argue that though economic structures of the game may change, the fundamental rules (race) do not. However, economic scholars see a process wherein shifts in capital and labor manifest directly manifest in renegotiations of what being racialized means at the local scale. This is a debate I cannot address. What is important to remember in all this is that in the reconception of curricular time, the reconception that today’s battles are simply an iteration of past battles required that Little Tokyo to function as an essentialized symbol of community and consciousness.

**Globalizing the Local, Localizing the Global in Little Tokyo**

Not only was Little Tokyo reconstructed as a symbol of concrete community history and place, but Sansei activists also sought to radicalize the meaning of place. They used Little Tokyo’s historicity as a tool for drawing lines of solidarity between Los Angeles and Vietnam. Those involved in the anti-war movement staged protests in Little Tokyo as a way of visualizing international solidarity between Asian/Third World Peoples. On January 17th, 1970, Asian
Americans for peace gathered to hear the bombastic Warren Furutani, orator and future state representative as he enthralled a crowd of angry Asian American anti-war protestors. He asked what would happen had he not been born in Gardena but in a “Village like My Lai? Then what about my little brothers, my mother and my grandmother? What future would they have? They would have none because they would be dead!” And the reason they are dead is because they are Asian.”

Furutani’s rhetoric is effective precisely because it relies on the visual conflation of ‘Japanese American’ and ‘Vietnamese’ as an oriental other, only made possible by their indistinguishability in the eyes of White America. Though seemingly dishonest to the modern reader, this conflation of Asian American and Asians was not uncommon on the battlefield: in one instance, a Japanese American serviceman who had suffered a head wound was left untreated while his White peers with minor injuries were being treated before him. After finally asking when they would treat his wounds, the medics replied: “aw shit man I didn’t know you were an American, I thought you were a gook.”

For Asian American activists disaffected with the White anti-war movement, Little Tokyo provided a staging ground for visualizing their opposition to a racist imperialist war against their Asian ‘cousins.’ In August of 1972, 150 Sansei activists marched down the streets of Little Tokyo as a part of the Van Troi youth brigade during the Nisei Week parade. They were led by Mike Nakayama dressed as a grotesque Nixon clad in the flags of Imperial Japan and the United States. Burning both the flags, the youth declared their opposition to the U.S’s

149 Tanaka, 1999.
150 Van Troi (1940-1964) was a South Vietnamese martyr, executed for his attempted assassination of Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. and Robert McNamara.
“genocidal war” and “to show our love and support to the just struggle of our Vietnamese cousins.”\textsuperscript{151} The fact that such an show of solidarity occurred at the height of an event highlighting Japanese American ownership of Little Tokyo demonstrates the activists’ commitment to contesting what being ‘Japanese American’ meant on the one hand and their aspirations for Little Tokyo as a space for third-world solidarity on the other. If Nisei Week demonstrated the collective ownership of the enclave by Japanese Americans, then the Van Troi youth brigade represented the Sansei’s desire to radicalize the meaning of that possession. More than a collection of shops and temples the Sansei imbued Little Tokyo with meanings as an authentic place where an authentic third-world community could be enacted.

In doing so they drew comparisons between their struggle to define an autonomous place in the city for Japanese American identity work with the national struggle of the Vietnamese people. A speaker, Umezawa at an anti-war demonstration in Little Tokyo in 1973 directly compared the situation of redevelopment in Little Tokyo with the Vietnamese struggle against the United States. He railed: “As we are gathered here to show our solidarity with the Vietnamese people and their struggle for self-determination against the U.S...it is ironic that here in our own community, we, too stand in the midst of a battlefield.” Umezawa takes the comparison even further, stating that at stake was the community and nation’s right to self-determination: “In many respects the future of Little Tokyo is our own future as a unified Japanese American people.”\textsuperscript{152} In this demonstration of solidarity, Little Tokyo becomes a

\textsuperscript{151} Nishida 2015, Ishizuka 2016, 110-113. Nishida indicated that this was as much of an indictment of US imperialism as it was of Japanese Imperial aggression during World War II and as a US ally.

symbolically charged place where pan-Asian solidarity and Third-World unity can take root while also becoming its own site of subnational resistance.

Little Tokyo became a place where young activists could spacialize their disidentification with mainstream America and find a space to negotiate a new selfhood. As Jenks puts it, “Little Tokyo was the concrete place from and through which these particular transnational and cross-racial visions of Japanese American identity and community were enunciated, enacted, and embodied at a key moment of change.” For these young Sansei, Little Tokyo rose in importance as a space where they could work for and with community, restore divisions between community groups and ground their Japanese-American identity and activism in a concrete place. However in doing so and making this claim, they began deploying the amorphous concept of a ‘Little Tokyo community,’ who it included and when they were included was subject to tensions involving who actually occupied the space of Little Tokyo and those who felt affective ties to the enclave. These tensions would boil over in contentious intra-communal dissent as the redevelopment program of the CRA struggled to deliver on its promises to the ‘community.’

Chapter 2: The Redevelopment Projects

Now that I have demonstrated how Sansei youth re-imagined the significance and meaning of the enclave, I will demonstrate how this visions of community clashed and cooperated with the Nisei elders of the community as well as the Community Redevelopment Agency. In this section I will examine visions and countervisions for four major projects of redevelopment in 1969-1980. These projects were: a senior home, a mall, a community center, and a luxury hotel. In each project I will try and capture the complex array of excitement, disappointment and opposition that accompanied each project in these two time periods. The questions I will ask, however, are broader than the physical structures that would eventually be built. Instead of trying to track a neat chronology start and completion dates, I will situate these projects in the larger debates about community, culture and ethnicity that these structures were generated from. For the affordable senior housing, I will demonstrate how it fit into an already existing agenda and vision of community held by activist elements within the Japanese American community. In the case of the cultural and community center, I will explore generational and class differences in defining ‘community’ and Japanese [American] ‘culture.’ For the controversial hotel project, I will rewrite its origins in order to demonstrate now Nisei leaders looked to Japan as an ally in fighting the city and reaping profits. And finally I will explore the complex array of community, commercialization, fetishization and nostalgia embodied by the Japanese Village Plaza.

Luxury Hotel
On September 1st, 1977, downtown Los Angeles’s newest luxury hotel, the New Otani Hotel & Garden celebrated its opening day. Amongst a flurry of Japanese salarymen, city bureaucrats, and kimono clad women, five of the most powerful men in the internationalization of Los Angeles’s downtown stood on a platform framed by a pair of gold folding screens. They were Los Angeles Mayor Thomas Bradley, L.A.’s Community Redevelopment Agency board member Kurt Meyer, City Councilmen of the downtown’s 9th district Gilbert Lindsay, Takio Atsumi the president of East West corporation which represented Japan’s biggest financial and industrial capital and the socialist Governor of Tokyo, Ryokichi Minobe.

After the national anthems of Japan and the United States and the ceremonial ribbon cutting, Mayor Bradley began his speech:

The completion of this New Otani Hotel is indeed a very special occasion. This landmark in the Little Tokyo redevelopment area is more than just a new hotel and restaurant, it is more than just a new innovation in the way of architecture, but it is a representation of the faith and confidence of the investors who built this facility in the Little Tokyo area in particular, and in the city of Los Angeles in general.

Turning towards the Japanese investors Bradley continued:

We are grateful to your for that faith and confidence. And we are grateful to you for all that you have done to boost the economy of Los Angeles and Little Tokyo and in bringing a new sense of pride to this very dynamic community.

Outside, however, a very different scene was brewing. Members of Little Tokyo People’s Rights Organization (LTPRO) had gathered to protest the destruction and renewal of their historic neighborhood, chanting: “Little Tokyo for the people not big business,” “The people united, will never be defeated” and “Asian passports out of our community.”154

154 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1244.
No other project from the Little Tokyo redevelopment generated as much community backlash and outcry as the construction of the New Otani Hotel and garden. Even Suga, who traces a cooperative history redevelopment between Japanese Americans, Japanese capital and the CRA admits that “mistrust and fear surfaced in a heated controversy over the construction of the New Otani Hotel and Garden.”

But let’s go to the beginning: why was a hotel project even being considered for a community redevelopment? How would a hotel, especially one catering to international visitors benefit a local community? The hotel project’s inception from a community perspective can only be understood from the perspective of the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Agency’s fears of Civic center expansion and consequent destruction of Little Tokyo.

Community-initiated redevelopment began in Little Tokyo when Reverend Toriumi of the Union Church approached city hall asking to buy extra parking space from the city government. In response he was told that it would be much easier if Little Tokyo leaders could organize themselves and bargain with the city as a unit. Consulting with other property owners and businessmen in the area, the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association (LTRA) was formed in 1963. In 1963 leaders of Little Tokyo’s business and religious institutions, calling themselves the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association (LTRA), met to discuss the future of Little Tokyo and possibilities for improvement. An overriding concern of these businessmen was the danger of civic center expansion into the ‘blighted’ enclave. Reflective of general

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155 Suga, 2004. 244
156 Suga, 2004. 245.
157 Jenks, 2008, 227. Psychology of the internment?
American urban development in the post-war period, much of the Federal assistance for new construction did not reach the inner cities and was instead concentrating on developing the burgeoning suburbs. As a result a 1969 architectural survey found that of the 138 buildings in Little Tokyo, 105 or, put another way 76% of the buildings, were “substandard or rehabilitation questionable.” Furthermore, about 80% of the buildings were built before 1933, and therefore did not meet subsequently enacted building safety regulations.\(^{160}\)

The structural unsoundness of the buildings, made Little Tokyo particularly vulnerable for demolition in the name of urban renewal. In 1952, not a decade after the end of Japanese American internment, a full quarter of the enclave was levelled in order to build a new police headquarters, Parker Center. According to Hiroshi Saisho, the Nisei owner of a record store in Little Tokyo, “At that time we were so unorganized we really didn’t know what was coming and didn’t know a damned thing about law. And when it came and took over it was just taking candy away from buildings...After that we got worried that the whole Little Tokyo would be taken over.”\(^{161}\) In 1963, the enclave was endangered by the prospect of street widening, highway expansion, and the construction of parking lots to accommodate downtown needs.\(^{162}\) Years later when defending the redevelopment project, one nisei woman said: “If we left Little Tokyo the way it was, the buildings would have eventually been condemned by the city.”\(^{163}\)

This privately organized redevelopment of Little Tokyo managed to build the 10-story Civic National Bank Building, and attract investment from Kajima Corp to build the Kajima

\(^{160}\) Little Tokyo Community Development Advisory Community, *Little Tokyo*. October 10, 1969. 7.

\(^{161}\) Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. 1214.


\(^{163}\) Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. 1199.
building, a 15-story skyscraper that would house Sumitomo Bank, the Japanese Consulate and the Japanese Chamber of Commerce.\textsuperscript{164} Despite their grandiose dreams however, the amount of capital that these businessmen and religious leaders could raise was not sufficient to realize their goals. In 1968 the LTRA approached Gilbert Lindsay, city councilmen of the downtown 9th District, which included Little Tokyo, who introduced them to the city redevelopment agency (CRA). In August of 1968, the CRA surveyed Little Tokyo and found that it qualified for the Federal Neighborhood Development Program (NDP). After the department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) approved Little Tokyo’s plan in February of 1969, LTCDAC (Little Tokyo Community Development Advisory Committee) was appointed by the Mayor. Finally on April 10, 1969, LTCDAC held its first official meeting.\textsuperscript{165}

Though the hotel project would come to represent the destruction of Little Tokyo at the hands of the CRA and Japanese capital, the hotel project’s roots come from the LTRA’s impulse to save the community from Civic Center expansion. Nishida, a good friend of Kango Kunitsugu (project manager of the early phase of Little Tokyo Redevelopment), insinuates that Kango Kunitsugu and Mitchell’s choice of Kajima had reflected deeper fears about civic center expansion. “He was trying to save J-town. They were talking about widening first street, wiping out the whole Northside so we wouldn’t have anything left but the Southside.” Talking about why Kajima was selected over the local developers Nishida contends that “Kango didn’t think these guys had enough oomph to stop the city from doing what it wanted to do.” To Nishida this is why under the LTRA the Kajima office building was built and later why Kajima was selected again to build a hotel. According to Nishida, Kango wanted “to bring in something so solid that

\textsuperscript{165} LTCDAC. Little Tokyo. October 1969. 12.
the city couldn’t fuck with. Kajima building, that multi million dollar hotel. Anchoring the northwest corner of J-town.\textsuperscript{166}

Just as Kango Kunitsugu viewed collaboration with Japanese firms as a way of protecting Little Tokyo from downtown encroachment, another prominent Nisei, Frank Chuman saw the potential for profit in collaboration with Japanese companies. His corporation which also submitted a bid to develop a hotel in Little Tokyo, Asiamerica Inc. actually invited Kajima to work with them as architects in the project.\textsuperscript{167} Asiamerica Inc. also worked with other Japanese developers including the Imperial Hotel of Japan who was “interested in [a] 1000 room hotel with [a] revolving rooftop restaurant.”\textsuperscript{168} A comparison of Kajima and Asiamerica Inc’s bids to develop a hotel both demonstrate similar visions for a mildly orientalized luxury development. Kajima’s proposal indicated that “The art of Japanese landscaping, utilizing open spaces to create environments which evoke unique Oriental feelings will be incorporated.”\textsuperscript{169} In a similar vein, Asiamerica Inc.’s proposal said that “From the moment the guest, tourist, visitor or business client enters the hotel and commercial complex, he must experience Japan. This includes landscaping of the areas of the structures with trees, carp-filled ponds and rivulets, arched foot bridges and fragrant flowers.”\textsuperscript{170}

Ultimately, as Jenks points out, the selection of Kajima as the developer initiated much community outcry. According to Jenks, Mitchell’s defense of Kajima in December of 1972 as

\textsuperscript{166} Nishida, 2015.
developer based on their “great personal interest in Little Tokyo,” was a particularly insulting to the second place Asiamerica Inc., developers. A highly angered Chuman took the “highly unusual step” of writing a letter to Mitchell, the director of the CRA while simultaneously publishing it in the Kashu Mainichi, Japanese American daily newspaper.171 Calling for a re-evaluation of the bids, in this letter he argued that Asiamerica Inc.’s hotel was bid was better on all accounts and that Kajima did not have the personal investment in the community that Asiamerica Inc. did. Even more damning, he insinuated that Mitchell was offered “employment by Kajima upon...near retirement,” that Mitchell and Kunitsugu (the Little Tokyo project manager) over ruled the “hotel review panel,” and that Kajima had already been promised contracts for the Japanese Cultural Center, the hotel, and a commercial complex- calling into the question the community component of community redevelopment.172

The complex relationship between Chuman, Kajima and the CRA demonstrates how Nisei business elites saw a place for Japanese capital as potential subordinate business allies in redevelopment. In a private memo, Chuman admitted the superiority of the Kajima bid while only complaining about the awarding of Kajima over his Nisei-controlled development group. Chuman admitted: “we had no basis on which we could oppose their [the CRA’s] decision. Kajima does have money, Prince [hotel operator] does operate hotels, they agree to take in local investors, they have strong managing developers in Cabot, Cabot and Forbes.” Rather, “We feel the imposition of a Japanese Firm on the Nisei area is not anywhere as near satisfactory as our proposal.”173 Here we see hints of the complex alignment of local and international interests. As

long as Japanese corporations and capital could be utilized to service Nisei views for a
redeveloped Little Tokyo, they were seen as valuable collaborators. As my analysis of their hotel
plans demonstrates, the only thing that made the Nisei bid more local was its Japanese American
ownership. Chuman’s designation of Little Tokyo as a “nisei area” indicates how Nisei
community leaders saw Little Tokyo as theirs to direct, protect and profit off of. As one
anti-redevelopment lawyer put it, “Many Nisei don’t relish the idea of having Japan control
Little Tokyo. And they want to control it, as they should, this is the United States of America,
sure it is Japanese culturally, but it is not supposed to be run from Japan.” 174

In writing a community centered history that, recognizes the larger economic and
political structures that dictated the possibilities of redevelopment, while trying to restore the
motivations and of the communal actors, the initial push for the hotel project as protecting the
community should not be forgotten. The actions of the Nisei leaders reflected their belief that
Japanese capital could be manipulated in their fight against the city and a parallel quest for
profits. I do not deny that Kajima’s presence in Little Tokyo represented an internationalization
of capital nor that fiscal challenges to the city 175 encouraged the construction of hotels and malls
as so many scholars have rightly pointed out. 176 However what I do disagree with is the
acceptance of these as the only relevant narratives, especially because they reduce Nisei attempts

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174 Charles McClung, Little Tokyo REdevelopment Collection. 1285.
175 I am referring here to tax increment financing, the innovative financing method for the CRA. Helfeld, the
director of the CRA, described the program as such: “If an area is declared a redevelopment project area by
city council, at that point, the taxes, the assessed valuation of that particular area is frozen. And any
increase in assessed valuation that happens as a result of redevelopment can be used for the purposes of
redevelopment.” (Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection Disc 1475). In other words, redevelopment is
financed on the premise that property values, hence taxes, will rise as an area is developed and that these
taxes can be recycled directly into the redevelopment area instead of being used for other city expenditures.
to save, develop and profit off their community into incidental prehistories for redevelopment instead of the guiding vision for their view of redevelopment.

**Little Tokyo Senior Housing 1969-1975**

The presence of around 400-600 Issei bachelors,\(^{177}\) single men who never had the chance to marry and who lived without the economic support of children, presented a unique social problem for community minded Japanese Americans. Nishida highlighted how lonely and dark things could be for these men who never really made it in America: “We used have a thing about telling people: You see a poor ass Issei, don’t give him money, don’t give him too much. Because he gonna go buy some booze, get fucked up in an alley with a buddy and then we’d find him dead pretty regularly in J-town. Or in their rooms. It was heart breaking.”\(^{178}\)

In December of 1971, *Pacific Citizen*, the newspaper of the Japanese American Citizens League, ran an article on the specific needs of Asian American elderly. Diagnosing the problems of these Asian American seniors they said: “Language problems created by lack of bilingual information systems and the lack of bilingual information systems and the lack of bilingual service workers deny Asian American aged even the knowledge of how to obtain...benefits.” Further they asserted that myths of Asian American success lead to the assumption that: “Asian American aged do not have any problems, that Asian Americans are able to take of their own and that Asian American aged do not need nor desire aid in any way.” However, citing suicide rates at three times the national average and the fact that a full third of Asian American elderly had

\(^{177}\) For the period that we are treating (1969-1980) I estimate the population to be around 400-600 based on estimates by two sources: “Market Feasibility Analysis: Little Tokyo Specialty Center Site.” 1975. Frank F. Chuman Papers, Box 634, folder 4., and “Report to City Council Accompanying Little Tokyo Redevelopment Plan.” 1969. Bradley (Mayor Tom) Papers (1920-1993), Box 2032, Folder 3.

\(^{178}\) Nishida, 2015.
never had a dental or medical exam, the article recommended a slew of policy decisions. Suggestions included: HUD financed low income housing construction for the Asian American elderly, a hot meals program, cultural sensitivity training for social workers, public transportation stipends for the elderly and ensuring welfare rights regardless of citizenship status.

The Japanese American community, especially young activists in the late 60s and 70s, however, did not wait for the government to begin forming and implementing these programs. Giving up their time and volunteering their efforts, they began serving Little Tokyo’s elderly through several organizations. Motivated by the call to ‘serve the people,’ taken from the revolutionary poet Lu Xun, popularized by Mao in China then by the Panthers in the United States, young activists began locating places of people work in their respective Chinatowns, Manilatowns, and Little Tokyos.

Essential to this early period of ‘serve the people’ work were the street activists. In contrast to the student contribution to the Asian American movement, the contributions of street youth is undertheorized in histories of the Asian American movement. This attitude is best summed up by William Wei who, in one of the first comprehensive histories of the Asian American movement, said that the movement was a result of: “the emergence of a generation of college-age Asian Americans and the public protests surrounding the Vietnam War.”

This interpretation of the movement is disturbing as it risks limiting historical agency to a narrow range of historical actors while playing down the radical possibilities of other subject positions, in this instance Japanese American street youth.

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180 Wei 1993. 1.
Japanese American gangs were an important presence for both physical and imaginary in the Asian American movement. According to Yoshimura, “At that time, and this was really typical of working class poor communities, there were a lot of gangs.”\(^{181}\) Though as Ishizuka says, “[the gangs] were chump change in comparison today’s gangs,”\(^{182}\) they were important social spaces where some form of resistance to White America could be enacted. As one former member put it, “Given the nature of things at that time, it was the only thing you could fall back on in order to maintain your self-dignity and pride.”\(^{183}\) Although reviled by community elders and earning the name yogore (literally Japanese for ‘filth’), they served as inspiration for other Sansei trying to articulate their disaffection, “To see these guys standing up and say: we’re bad, when people mess with us, we’re gonna mess back...I think those guys played a certain kind of role.”\(^{184}\)

The role of the yogores, or street youth, was more than symbolic opposition. Nishida emphasized that, “We [street youth] were one of the first units to organize, even before the students.”\(^{185}\) Ishizuka credits the birth of the Asian American movement in the San Francisco State College and UC Berkeley campus strikes in 1968, but credits its conceptualization “a decade earlier not on any campus, but in the streets. Before there were campus radicals there were street rebels...”\(^{186}\) Nishida described their model of organizing as coming from a “Panther model”:

“It was the self-defense model it was based on the idea that people who fuck up usually have low self image and to build up your image you do something that people will admire

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\(^{181}\) Yoshimura 2015.
\(^{182}\) Ishizuka 2016, 76.
\(^{183}\) George Nakano quoted in Ishizuka, 2016. 78.
\(^{184}\) Tanaka, 1999.
\(^{185}\) Nishida, 2015.
\(^{186}\) Ishizuka, 2016. 76.
you for. So you do serve the people work and people begin to admire you and begin to feel better about yourself as you serve the community.”

As Nishida indicated, serve the people was a symbiotic process that imbues a sense of self-worth while also creating community. Ishizuka captures well the intangible power of this transformation: “The idea of serving the people signaled a new definition of community, which at its core is simply the subjective feeling of belonging - a combined sense of solidarity and shared identity.”

As Scott Kurashige, Tanaka, Pulido and Ishizuka have documented, the street youth embraced serve the people work as they organized themselves into the Asian American Hard Core and later the Yellow Brotherhood. The Asian American Hard Core and Yellow Brotherhood, whose membership included former drug abusers or prisoners were instrumental in beginning the fight against substance abuse within the Seinan / Crenshaw area where drug overdoses killed 31 in 1971. The activism of these former gang members extended back into Little Tokyo: the founders of the Pioneer Center, a social and recreational center for the Issei, Nishida and Matsuoka were once from rival gangs. Therefore, for street youth, the importance of Little Tokyo, as a community of underserved ethnic minorities, was that it provided a space where their journey back to pride and self-esteem could begin as they followed the Panther model of self-liberation.

Three serve the people organizations in particular are worth mentioning: the Little Tokyo Pioneer Center, the Japanese American Community Services- Asian Involvement office (JACS-AI), and the Japanese Welfare Rights Organization (JWRO). These organizations

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188 Ishizuka 2016. 115.
190 Ishizuka 2016. 120.
demonstrated the commitment on the part of the young people of the community to bettering the quality of life of their senior citizens. These service organizations demonstrate another type of informal, non governmentally funded redevelopment of the community: creating both transgenerational community spaces while meeting the needs of the underserved within the community.

In order to combat the social isolation and loneliness of the Little Tokyo Issei, the Pioneer Center in the Sun Building was established in October 18th 1969, through a combined community effort. Although spearheaded by activist Mo Nishida and Jim Matsuoka, the fundraising campaign received support from the JACL, the SoCal Fujinkai (women’s club), “We Are One” - an organization for widows and divorcees, Hawaii Veterans club, various Buddhist and Christian churches, and even the relatively conservative Japanese Chamber of Commerce (JCC). The Pioneer Center housed a Shogi room, a main reception room, a kitchen and a library. Later, the Center would also provide daily hot meals for 150 senior citizens living in the nearby low income hotels for $.50: though the $.50 charge was largely symbolic and only charged to avoid the stigma of charity. The Center also arranged trips of a political nature like pilgrimages to Manzanar, a wartime internment camp, as well as more recreational ones to the beach. An activist publication, Gidra commented on the excitement of opening day saying: “Bell bottomed Sansei rubbed shoulders with old and wrinkled Issei and, as if by magic, the gulf of years was spanned.” Celebrating the spirit of the center it said: “‘People Power’ is what makes community and ‘People Power’ is what made the Japanese Community Pioneer Center.”

Also in the Sun Building was the JACS-AI office. The Japanese American Community Services (JACS) was originally incorporated in 1961 by progressive Niseis in order to "tackle the problems that reflect the growing pains of our community such as juvenile delinquency, family counseling, problems of the aged..."\textsuperscript{193} Despite an auspicious beginning, by 1964 there were not enough sufficient funds to support a full-time staff, and the JACS board were reduced to managing a dormant fund.\textsuperscript{194}

Facing pressure from Sanei activists to provide relevant programming for the community, JACS began their Asian Involvement (AI) program in 1969 to "insure that the basic human rights of food, clothing, shelter, medical aid and education to which all people are entitled are met..."\textsuperscript{195} According to Yoshimura the JACS-AI office, located in Little Tokyo’s Sun Building, "was kind of the center of the movement." She elaborated: "The JACS office was about meeting basic needs, education, health care. They did a health fair since access to healthcare was really different [from today]." Citing problems of access to medical services she said: "for the bachelors who lived in the hotels down there [Little Tokyo], there were no services at all."\textsuperscript{196} The JACS-AI office had the support of over 300 volunteers, mostly Sansei youth who were committed to providing medical, legal and social services for the elderly as well as anti-drug programs for the youth. The nature of the work was so grassroots "that many barriers between helper and those to be helped are removed."\textsuperscript{197} In their work, the JACS-AI office filled a crucial void of unaddressed problems within the community such as healthcare, drug abuse and the

\textsuperscript{194} Kuramoto, 1972. 152.
\textsuperscript{196} Yoshimura, 2015.
\textsuperscript{197} Kuramoto, 1972. 155.
welfare of senior citizens which had been marginalized in the quest to prove “we shouldn’t have been sent to camp.”

Lastly the Japanese Welfare Rights Organization (JWRO) was founded in February of 1971 in response to a letter by the Department of Public Social Services Manual letter 155 declaring that “aliens” without green cards would not be eligible for public assistance. This was particularly insulting to Japanese Americans given that Isseis were barred from acquiring citizenship for all of the prewar period. JWRO, located in Little Tokyo, provided bilingual legal aid for elderly Japanese Americans facing the red tape of the welfare system. Additionally, as a bilingual service organization, JWRO had the most visible Shin-Issei (new Japanese immigrants) volunteers who had their own unique trajectory of radicalization from a context outside of the United States. Most notably, Dr. Kenji Irie, a prominent member of JWRO, came out of the zengakuren student protests in Japan during his time at Tokyo University Medical School.

In writing a history that centers community efforts on the part of the Japanese Americans of Los Angeles, I think it is important to recognize the ways in which community, ethnicity and space were being reimagined in the period between 1969 and 1980 irrespective of a formal governmental redevelopment agenda.

As the business elites and the city planners were dreaming of a new ethnic theme-park, activists and concerned community members were also re-imagining and building a new Little

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198 Tanaka, Janice, Joyce Nako, Linda Mabalot, and Inc Visual Communications. When You're Smiling. Visual Communications, 1999. Tanaka’s documentary focuses on how drug issues in particular were covered up within the Japanese American community as the community tried to live up to the model minority stereotype. Yoshimura 2015.

199 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1265.

Tokyo. This was a Little Tokyo based on the ideals of self-sufficiency, intergenerational care, self-empowerment, and "people power." And it was this vision of Little Tokyo they brought to LTCDAC when formal CRA-sponsored redevelopment began in 1969.

Activists took no time in ensuring that affordable housing was on the redevelopment agenda. In May of 1970, Mo Nishida, then chair of the Senior Citizens Task Force of LTCDAC met with Christian and Buddhist ministers to distribute a survey to their congregation in order to determine "the special ethnic requirements for a Senior Citizens housing project."201 In October, the results of the survey indicated that 75% of respondents would be interested in moving into low-income housing in Little Tokyo, while another 56% indicated that they would like to see low-income senior housing developed regardless of location. Additionally, to ensure that it was a full community effort, the Senior Citizens Task Force reached out to four key institutions of the Japanese American community: the JACL, the Bukkyō Rengō Kai (Buddhist Federation), Southern California Christian Church Federation, and the Southern California Gardeners Federation: the influential Japanese gardeners union.202 By the end of the year, Kango Kunitsugu, director of the CRA Little Tokyo project optimistically predicted that a 350-unit structure, dubbed "Little Tokyo Towers" could be completed by 1972, or 1973.203 However, red tape combined with an unexpected 1973 Nixon initiated freeze on HUD assistance to housing and community assistance the, "Nixon Moratorium," would push the completion date back to July of 1975.204

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201 LTCDAC, Little Tokyo. April 1970.
Though by 1976 and certainly by the demolition of the Sun Hotel and Building in 1977, the activists would delineate a clearly oppositional stance against LTCDAC and City Hall interests, a more thorough examination of the sources reveals the level of collaboration across sections of the community, especially in relation to caring for the aged. According to Nishida, “The beauty of that thing [Little Tokyo Towers] was that the elders of our community were down there chasing HUD secretary, Romney, to get his commitment to fund the housing and we were demonstrating down in the streets and we got it.”

The fact that the activists were often outnumbered and often lost out to commercial and propertied interests within LTCDAC throughout the 1970s should not occlude the fact that they also were actively building, advocating for, and imagining their own ‘redeveloped’ community. There was a measured optimism on the part of the youth advocates in their ability to influence LTCDAC. When asked if the youth activists opposed redevelopment around 1970-71 Jim Matsuoka, active in the Pioneer Center said:

I think there is no opposition to it from the younger people. The Little Tokyo Redevelopment Agency group [LTCDAC] in J-town has gone to great lengths to align themselves in many ways with many of the social programs that the young people have developed. They’ve helped with programs like Community Information Service Day... they’re very sensitive to what the young people are asking for in Little Tokyo.

In the early period of redevelopment, 1969-1972, concerned youth saw a place for themselves within redevelopment and an opportunity to revive the community on their own terms. The activist run publication, Gidra, emphasized the possibilities of redevelopment: “We now have within our powers the chance to revitalize the spirit [of Little Tokyo] as well as to create an

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205 Nishida, 2015.
environment which is representative of the total Japanese community. The decision is with you, the people.”

(fig. 4 Issei enjoying the Chushoku kai nutrition program for the elderly at Union Church in 1976. The nutrition program was one of many social programs oriented towards the Japanese American elderly in the late 60s and 70s. From Little Tokyo 100 years in Pictures. Murase, Mike 1983.)

Cultural & Community Center

A proposed community center figured largely in plans for a redevelopment community and was initially greeted with much optimism. In the words of Nishida, “[The] JACCC [Japanese

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American Cultural and Community Center], when it first started out was envisioned as a total community effort. So that meant, not just the rich guys, but everyone was part of that. In the same *Gidra* article articulating the hopes for redevelopment referenced in the earlier section, the author claimed: “The cultural-community center will represent the major symbolic thrust of the Japanese people.” It further claimed that the center should represent the community in its totality: “old as well as the young, the professional and nonprofessional, the artist and the layman.” Plans for this complex included a theater, gymnasium and an office building with an initial price tag of about $3.5 million. Suga put the final price tag at nearly double this initial estimate.

Though both the cultural and community center and affordable senior housing received broad community support, they were different in one crucial aspect. Unlike senior housing which could utilize government subsidies and direct federal assistance, there existed far fewer federal or city programs for subsidizing cultural and community centers. Though HUD grants would foot about $75,000, the rest had to be fundraised. While the Japanese American community did not have direct federal support, they did have something else: their ethnicity.

In early March of 1970, the Japanese Vice-Consul to Los Angeles, Miyoko Iida kicked started the fundraiser for the cultural and community center with a $100 donation. A year later, in March of 1971, the JACCC was incorporated as a community corporation with Katsuma Mukaeda, a prominent lawyer, famous within the community for helping Japanese

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208 Nishida 2015.
Americans in Los Angeles fight against the Alien land laws, as its president. In November of 1971, Mukaeda declared the beginning of a “massive fundraising drive” that would “probably reach international proportions.” Optimistically, the new board of the JACCC predicted fundraising and construction to be finished in two years, by 1972. It would take until May of 1980 for the first phase of construction to be completed.

The function of this board of directors: to raise a massive amount of money, including money from Japanese corporations, then, from the beginning, inherently biased board to favor businessmen and those with connections to Japan. A cursory glance at the original directors included a president of the Japan America Society, a president of Japanese American Republicans, the vice president of Kajima International, a president of Toyota Motor Distributors, Inc.; a chair of the L.A.-Nagoya sister city affiliation, the president of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce (JCC), a Nissan executive and a slew of Japanese American businessmen. Therefore, due to structural issues with the funding of urban renewal as it related to community institutions, the board of directors was structurally biased to represent the interests of Japanese corporate sponsors as well as the business elite of the community. As anti-redevelopment activist Mike Murase put it: “[The board] was heavily stacked for both Japanese Americans and Japanese who had influence or money or both. And so a person who is maybe a

local calligraphy teacher who can gather up ten cultural instructors still won’t get on the board.”

Writ larger, three groups of stakeholders emerge from the JACCC board: Japanese governmental and corporate representatives or “Japan Inc.,” the Nisei elites, and the Sansei activists who held the minority position. Each of these stakeholders had their own agenda for what “cultural” and “community” center meant. Lon Kurashige has pointed out that many activists saw Japan Inc.’s interest in Little Tokyo as coming from a desire to facilitate acceptance of Japanese culture and goods. They accused that: “Japanese corporate -types and the local heavyweight corporation representatives...feel that the JACCC’s role should be to serve [as] the ‘Japan House of the West’, and help cement relations between business and government leaders of both nations.”221 For the Japanese corporate representatives then, a potential new center would be more “culturally” than communally oriented, in an expensive PR strategy for Japanese goods. Speaking about the future redevelopment of Little Tokyo, Nagahisa Ono, a Japanese national who worked at the East West Development corporation said: “Since we are sort of representing Japan, we should give the American public good quality merchandise in this area.”222

Similarly, the Nisei elites saw the cultural center as an opportunity to bridge two cultures: Japanese and American. In the opening ceremonies for the JACCC, Doizaki, one of the chief fundraisers for the center said: “Our Japanese heritage and traditions will be transplanted here to introduce its culture and the beauty of the arts.” He further called the project a “bridge between Japan and the United States...where we can preserve and promote the rich Japanese culture into

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220 Murase, 2015.
222 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1191
the Western United States...in LA, gateway to the great pacific." Defending the redevelopment project at a city hall meeting, Kenji Ito also defined the future JACCC in similar terms: "This center is intended to bring together all persons without regards to race, nationality, or color, so that better understanding might be established [between] various ethnic groups and the general American community." Regardless of their personal beliefs, the rhetoric of these Nisei elites sold the proposed community center as a way of mediating the transfer of an essentialized Japanese culture to the United States. In their vision of the center, "culture" is Japanese high culture, and "community" is seen as the multicultural population of Los Angeles.

Judged from a contemporary 21st century scholar’s view of race in the United States, the rhetoric of the Nisei elites around "culture" and "community" seem simplistic and essentializing at best. And at worst, their conceptualization lift up Japanese Americans at the expense of other minorities whose cultures are less commodifiable. While recognizing this, I suggest that the desire to promote understanding and bridge cultures between the United States and Japan with a cultural center is better seen on its own terms: as coming from a generation of Japanese Americans who experienced internment as a direct result of "misunderstanding" between Japan and America.

Don Nakanishi’s interviews in 1973 with Los Angeles Nisei leaders demonstrates their consciousness about Japanese Americans’ dependence on the relationship between Japan and the United States. One commented: "Many writers when they look at us don’t see any difference between us and the *kaisha* [lit. company] people...Their attitudes are affected by the times. If they are favorable toward Japan, then they are favorable towards us. If not, then it is the other

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223 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1269.
224 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection. Disc 1200.
Another Nisei put it a little more bluntly: “We are what other people say we are. Being visible Asians in America, we are not only representatives of ourselves but of Japan. We have to come to grips with it. We are caught in it. And we should recognize it and work it through.”226

Seen from this perspective, from the intense racialization of the Nisei generation through the internment camp experience, calls for “understanding” and “cultural bridges” have to be seen in a new light. They simultaneously demonstrate both a classist understanding of multiculturalism and the an understanding of racial harmony based on their specific lived experience of racism in the U.S. However, in constructing this symbolic bridge that would mediate the transfer of an essentialized “Japanese culture” to the United States, these Nisei leaders obscured an older version of working class Japanese culture in America, arousing the ire of Sansei activists.

As Maeda has demonstrated, for the activist elements of Sansei activists what mattered to them was not an essentialized Japanese culture, rather it was the experience of immigration that defined a unique “Japanese American” culture. In an article advocating ethnic studies young activists decried a statement made by famous integrationist S.I. Hayakawa’s assertion that ethnic studies are unnecessary since “Sansei can always relate back to Japan if he is dissatisfied with American Society,” to which the activists responded, “This is our country!! Ethnic studies is the study of the culture and history of this country, our country.”227 This supports Maeda’s argument that: “activists found the cultural significance of Little Tokyo not in any connection to Japan, but rather in the continued existence of the culture of the working-class immigrants along with the more recent cultural mixings that characterized the neighborhood.”228 It was this vision of culture

228 Maeda, 2012. 70.
and community that they strove to nurture in the form of the JACS-AI office and the Pioneer Center. Suga, in her analysis of the redevelopment period, writes glowingly of how the modern Cultural and Community Center fulfilled the Issei’s dream of “transmitting their culture to younger generations.” Though it is important to recognize how redevelopment financed by Japanese Capital allowed for the eventual construction of a modern Cultural and Community facility, these community-initiated community centers should not be forgotten.

In addition to these informal community centers, Sansei activists were also building new cultural centers that embraced their liminality between ‘American’ and ‘Japanese.’ Amerasia Bookstore which opened in Little Tokyo on August 15th, 1971 demonstrates the ways in which Sansei activists were establishing new spaces for expressing a unique Asian American culture. Originally coming from the needs of students of nascent Asian American studies courses, Amerasia Bookstore became a total community arts and culture center. The list of activities centered around Amerasia were varied and eclectic, one worker said: “We’ve had workshops during the summer for neighborhood youth corps. We’ve had workshops in leather, silk screen, music. We’ve done things like film showings, we’ve sponsored concerts of new music like Hiroshima. We’ve had speakers like Frank Chin and poets that come and talk.” Speaking about the goals of the store he elaborated that young activists “wanted to begin to develop an alternative lifestyle…[to] get involved in projects that we’re interested in…to have a place, [where] writers and craftspeople could show what they’re involved in making.” In Amerasia Bookstore, not only was a store that spoke to the Asian American experience but also was a

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230 Hiroshima was an important Japanese American Jazz-fusion band, still active in the Japanese American community.
231 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1170.
232 Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection, Disc 1170.
living community of artists, poets, musicians creating a culture that defied narrow and essentialist definitions of “Japanese” culture.

The building that housed the JACS-AI office and the Pioneer Center, the Sun Building, was also an important cultural and community center. The unassuming brick Sun Building, which was destroyed by redevelopment in 1977, contained a critical mass of cultural, service, and community institutions. Yoshimura remembers how it housed the JACL, Visual Communications (the activist filmmakers that would capture the redevelopment struggle), and a variety of cultural arts instructors including Japanese-style wax dying. Nishida remembers two go-kado (go clubs), one for the rich and another for the “regular guys.” In addition to housing activist groups such as Little Tokyo People’s Rights Organization (LTPRO), the Japanese Welfare Rights Organization (JWRO) it also housed traditional koto and shamisen musical instructors. Speaking about the difference between the Sun Building and the current JACCC, Nishida said, “It was us. Nothing so pretentious as the JACCC building now.”

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239 Maeda, 2012, 70.
234 Nishida, 2015; Murase 2015; Yoshimura, 2016. Little Tokyo Redevelopment Collection 1214.
In addition, the Sun Building also contained the intercultural exchange, the Nisei leaders wanted to see in a future Cultural and Community center, if you looked close enough. A moment from the VC redevelopment collection demonstrates how this vision of culture and community already existed in the Sun Building. At a contentious meeting between the CRA and activists discussing relocation for the tenants of the Sun Building, a middle-aged Jewish man, Sidney Plotnik stood up to ask about the future of the *gokaidō*. He said: “My name is Sidney Plotnik and I'm a go student: that's a Japanese game that's as complicated as chess and I study it in the Sun Building.” He continued: “I don't want to see my teachers scattered to the four winds to be gathered later because these Issei are a living cultural continuity.” In this small instance of solidarity, we see how the Sun Building provided Plotnik with a space to learn a respect for a game “as complicated as chess,” as well as respect for the teachers and people behind the game and the culture that it comes from, the Issei. This is the Sun Building, I believe the activists were fighting for: a space for community and cultural exchange that respected the Issei as teachers, living cultural continuities and deserving of a decent space to be.

(fig. 6 LTPRO protest to protect the Sun Building from demolition, 1977. The Sun building represented a critical mass of community and cultural institutions within the Japanese American community. From *Little Tokyo 100 Years In Pictures*, Mike, Murase 1983.)

*Shopping Mall*
Unlike the senior citizen housing, the culture and community center, and the hotel project, a shopping mall for Little Tokyo was a rocky project from the beginning. It was only after two failed attempts that the Japanese Village Plaza, a themed mall was finally constructed by an association of “local” 22 businesses / merchants in 1978. Mixing commercial and community interests, old-world nostalgia and cultural consumption, this project presented a unique vision of Japan and Japanese Americans in America.

Despite being a “community project,” certainly a great deal of the appeal of the Japanese Village Plaza was the experience it provided for non-Japanese, white shoppers. In her short analysis of the Japanese Village Plaza, Jenks connects it to a spatial practice of turning “sanitized ‘ethnic’ enclaves - into zones for entertainment and consumption rather than labor and manufacture, attracting the lucrative attention of tourists and wealthy shoppers.” A key strategy to the Plaza was then a distinct emerging trend in retail towards “theme” or “speciality” shopping. Key to this concept was the idea of creating a pleasing environment, evocative of a different time or culture, filled with relatively small stores and restaurants - themselves a source of entertainment as you watch, say sushi being prepared.

237 In referring to the non Japanese-American / Japanese-Japanese consumer market sources always refer to whites or caucasians, marginalizing the potential contributions of Latino or Black consumers in Little Tokyo as irrelevant.
(fig. 7. Japanese Village Plaza, developed mostly by Nisei capital, this mall represents an exotification of Japanese culture but also a celebration of ethnic pride. From *Japanese Village Plaza: Award Winning Shopping Center*, 1980. Frank F. Chuman Papers, Box 634, folder 3).

The Japanese Village Plaza fits this image of a “themed space.” Promotional materials for the mall exhorted potential shoppers to “Experience Japan without the fear of flying!” And less subtly, “Experience Japan in Japanese Village Plaza.”240 *Civic Center News* declared that “If you feel as if you have stepped into a time warp, you have come to Japanese Village Plaza.”241 While *Sunset Magazine*, a West-Coast home-improvement magazine, encouraged shoppers to “Stop to watch sushi being made in a sidewalk window or marvel at the speed at which a young cook flips hockey-puck-sized bean cakes [imagawayaki].”242 Most significantly, the architectural style of the Japanese Village Plaza harkened back to the street market of a Japanese

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The imported Sanshu blue roof tiles and the 5-story yagura or traditional fire tower further linked this mall to a vision of "traditional" Japan.

The themed experience however, only captures one dimension of the mall’s existence: its relation to white consumers and does not get at what a mall reminiscent of old Japan could mean for Japanese Americans. In order to understand the complex relationship between "community" and mall, it is useful to compare the Japanese Village Plaza to the Weller Court shopping center that was being developed down the street by Kajima. Unlike the more controversial Weller Court, being constructed by the Japanese corporation Kajima, the Japanese Village Plaza was conceived designed and owned by the self-styled "Mama and Papa" stores of Little Tokyo. The Weller Court mall, on the other hand, was conceived as an extension of the hotel and therefore housed luxury department stores such as Matsuzakaya.

(fig. 8 Weller Court, developed by Kajima’s East West corporation, which also built the New Otani Hotel & Garden- visible in the background. Clearance of the Weller Triangle generated much community outcry in the 1970s. From Little Tokyo 100 Years in Pictures, Murase, Mike 1983.)

244 Japanese Village Plaza. "Fact Sheet." Undated, c 1977?
The financing and rent structure further reflected a community orientation, aimed at supporting the “mom and pop” stores of Little Tokyo. With pre-redevelopment Little Tokyo ground-story floor rents going from as cheap as $.17 to $.54 per square foot, the developers of Japanese Village Plaza proposed rent level at $.50 per square foot, including utilities, which was cheaper than the $.70 being asked by Kajima in their new developments. Other benefits included a $20,000 rental subsidy for tenants displaced by redevelopment projects, a 5-year cap for rent at $.54 (including property tax, insurance, and maintenance) and free tenant improvements. Additionally, the initial capital ($1.4 million) for the project was raised from professionals and merchants within the Japanese community from investments as small as $1,000 to a quarter million. In this way, the financing and rental structure of the shopping center was a “community” effort on the part of the Little Tokyo businessmen.

Additionally, the Japanese Village Plaza, while being a themed space, was evocative of the images held by Japanese American of their ‘ancestral home.’ Referring again to Nakanishi’s interviews with Nisei and Sansei leaders we see that their image of Japan is a romanticized and abstracted image of pre-modern Japan. One Nisei interviewee found an image of the village life his parents left behind in a visit to the Japanese countryside: “My parents had a lot to do with my image of Japan….they made us appreciate the old Japan. When I went to Japan - the scenery, the old homes, the natural setting, and the Japanese gardens - they were all a reality now.”

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Though the Sansei interviewed by Nakanishi were in general more critical of the negative aspects of Japan - its treatment of minorities, its class structure, and uncritical Westernization, some still saw something redeeming in old Japan. One related to the movies of Toshio Mifune of “Seven Samurai” fame and said: “The rural Japan turns me on with its serenity...I relate to Toshio Mifune and the samurai because those were Japanese and they had an identity...When I see samurai movies I see a characterization that is really human. We’ve never been depicted as such here.” Another Sansei kendo champion talked how he had a “hard time relating” to American historical landmarks but that “when I went to Japan I visited the shrines and temples, and I could relate to those things. That’s where my ancestors came from.”

In the light of these interviews, the Japanese Village Plaza cannot be condensed into solely a narrative of the fetishization of ethnicity and the rise cultural consumption. Certainly that is part of the narrative, but the the same space of cultural consumption also was a reflection Japanese American’s own image of Japan that they felt the most connected to. The Japanese Village Plaza as landscape of the ‘old country’ was furthered by its selection as the site for numerous cultural festivals. In promotional materials for the mall, architect and developer, David Hyun said that the Plaza would “not just be a shopping center” but also “the scene of many colorful events which harkened back to the culture of the Old Country.” In 1979, the new shopping mall was the host of three major community events: the Nisei Week opening ceremonies, the hanamatsuri festival in honor of the Buddha’s birthday, and a Christmas

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254 Japanese Village Plaza, “Japanese Village Plaza, Award Winning Shopping Center of Little Tokyo.”
255 Nisei Week is an annual summer Japanese-American festival held in Little Tokyo. For more information see Lon Kurashige, Japanese American Celebration and Conflict. 2002.
celebration with a Japanese Santa-Claus carried in a *mikoshi*, a type of divine Shintō sedan chair.

Therefore, Japanese Village Plaza provided a space for the expression of Japanese American identity through celebration and conscious performances of Japanese ethnicity. Though promotion and profits must have been on the minds of Japanese Village Plaza in staging these celebrations, the shopping mall did provide a communal space for the reification the “Japanese” side of Japanese American identity.

The mall, however, represented more than aspirations towards an essentialized notion of homeland, it also sought to redefine the relationship between Japan, Japanese American history and the enclave. They reified the enclave’s importance as a historic home for its “mom and pop” stores which they called the “backbone of Little Tokyo for three generations,” and guardians of a “historical way of life.” In this conceptualization of enclave, the significance of Little Tokyo is its small businesses which preserve and sell an essentialized Japanese-ness, embodied in both the products and the owners of the “mom and pop” businesses.

The *yagura* or fire tower itself symbolized another new self-narrative of the Little Tokyo community. Explaining the significance of the firetower, the materials said: “Just as the Fire Tower, which stands at the entrance on First St., is a proud testimony to the Issei, Japanese Pioneers who first settled in this area, so it is also a testimony to the opportunity this country offers to all. Japanese Village Plaza is a rich ingredient to the American melting pot.” In this image, Japanese American small business owners are not only heirs to a rich cultural tradition that they must sell to Americans, but they are also heirs to an American dream of upward

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mobility. Therefore, in rearticulating the meaning of enclave, culture and identity, the Japanese Village Plaza, celebrated the ‘traditional’ Japanese cultural roots of the Little Tokyo community while simultaneously commodifying those roots into a shopping experience. And in this process, the working class roots of Little Tokyo were erased: The gambling dens, the nomiyas, and prostitution that dominated Little Tokyo bachelor life\(^{259}\) give way to an image of an upwardly mobile ethnic community. If the Sansei saw Little Tokyo’s importance as an essentialized symbol of past and present discrimination of the Japanese in America, the Nisei developers of the Japanese Village Plaza saw its importance as the site of past and present vendors of Japanese culture: whose activities brought acceptance for Japanese culture and, by extension, people.

*Defining ‘Culture’ and ‘Community’ in the Redevelopment Projects*

As these four projects have demonstrated, redevelopment represented a complex array of attempts to build community spaces, redefine Japanese American culture, and articulate a claim to space for Japanese Americans in America. We see how there were two simultaneous redevelopments of space that began in the 1960s. One was a youth-led and was focused on ‘serving the people’ about ‘meeting the needs’ of the Issei bachelors as well creating intergenerational spaces to care for community elders, who, to the Sansei, were living embodiments of a history and culture of struggle. Another was business oriented and was based around saving the physical enclave from destruction at the hands of civic center expansion, keeping Little Tokyo recognizably ‘Japanese,’ and about promoting commercial revival. When the latter group organized themselves into the LTRA in 1963 and later applied to the CRA for assistance in 1969, they had to position their requests from the city as coming from a ‘Little

Tokyo community.’ However, in using the amorphous term ‘community’ they gave youth activists a springboard for voicing their agenda. The malleability of the word “community” is reflected in the projects that redevelopment eventually created: a hotel built to protect a physical community of shops and merchants, senior housing to provide for the elder members of an ethnic community, and a mall and cultural / community center for a multicultural metropolitan community. And, as the Sun hotel struggle demonstrates these two agendas for Little Tokyo and ‘community’ could drastically come to a head.

The two groups also had two competing agendas for the position of the enclave in relation to Japanese American culture. The Nisei business elites, inspired by stories from their parents, scarred by internment, and dreaming of profits saw Little Tokyo as an international mediator of the culture of ‘old Japan’ to the United States. Youth activists on the other hand saw Little Tokyo itself and the Isseis as a type of distinct Japanese-American cultural heritage. Part of this included ‘old Japan,’ but more importantly it was their history of struggle that represented an ‘authentic’ Japanese American culture. Finally, while the Nisei leaders saw a position for themselves in America as a representatives of an upwardly-mobile, but ethnically distinct group, the youth activists focussed their attention on the segments and issues within the community marginalized in the community’s quest to become a model minority.

Though both groups, the Nisei and the Sansei may have disagreed over the legacy of what the Issei and Little Tokyo meant, what they did not contest was the fact that they were the inheritors of the both the legacy and the enclave. So while the Nisei may have seen expedience in courting Japanese capital in their dreams of furthering the commercial community and Sansei allied themselves with low income residents of the hotels, neither questioned the notion of Little
Tokyo as a Japanese American space. While for the Niseis Japanese capital was welcomed into the enclave, those who were supposed to control the development were ‘local’ Nisei. And while Sansei believed that Little Tokyo as a space should serve the needs of all national minorities and working people, they never engaged with the question of who should be ‘serving the people’ nor the narratives of community and history that put them in position to ‘serve the people.’

Ultimately, the most lasting impact of the Nisei and Sansei were not commercial success: the New Otani Hotel, Weller Court, and Japanese Village Plaza have encountered many financial woes over the years while many of the original mom and pop stores have since gone out of business. Nor is the creation of a viable low-moderate income community of self-sufficient working people as the structures of federal funding did not make this a possibility. Rather the most enduring legacies of that time is the notion of historic ownership, that the spaces between 1st, Alameda, San Pedro and 2rd street constitute a ‘Little Tokyo’ and that that is and continues to be the spiritual furusato of the community in spite of a new transit hub, Staples and Korean BBQ joint.
Postscript

Throughout this paper I have made a conscious analytical choice to decenter the struggle over the New Otani hotel. This reflects my development as an academic throughout the research process. When I first began researching, I had assumed that I would write a relatively simple narrative: how students radicalized by ethnic studies struggles and the rediscovery of the internment experience applied the lessons learned to a struggle against a callous city government and megalithic flows of international capital. Much of this was rooted in my own experiences as a student of American history, radicalized on a college campus and looking for models of social justice and activism within my community.

I did extensive research and found the archival materials to support this story that I wanted to tell, however I began to question the applicability of this narrative after my interview with Yoshimura. On the origins of the JACS-AI fund she told me: “It started as an orphanage, there used to be an orphanage for Japanese American orphans that helped kids relocate to the camps. After the war it kind of went dormant for a little bit and what happened is that some of the gangs in the community got together and raised money for the orphanage, this was in the 50s. And then the children’s home closed and the fund became the Japanese American Community Service (JACS) fund.” She continued: “I don’t want to say gangs, but kids who were anti-social, maybe, or weren’t the most successful in the community, were many times the ones who reached back, did the fundraiser for the orphanage, or help the senior citizens who lived down in Little Tokyo. You know what I’m saying you’re JA (Japanese American), the people who are the best and the brightest and go to the best schools are only one part of the story.”

260 Yoshimura. 2015.
After hearing this I began realizing how my subject position, within my community, was reflected in the questions I asked, in the story I was chasing after. In privileging a group with a subject position similar to my own, I felt like I was projecting my own experience into the data, asking the history to look and sound more like my own trajectory rather than allow to history to show me its own patterns and shapes. As a privileged member of community, with time, money and education to write this history, I realized that I owed my community more.

Though the process of writing history always necessitates choices: letting certain voices be heard while muting others, these choices were made harder by having living historical subjects. These subjects not only trusted me with their oral histories, but also have deeply influenced my own sense of belonging as a fourth generation Japanese American, born in Los Angeles. As a historian there are a set of values and objectives that must be maintained while writing history: theoretical rigor, preciseness with archival material, navigating words inherited through the historiography: ‘identity,’ ‘neoliberalism,’ ‘state’ and ‘power.’ And perhaps most importantly, one has to maintain a certain distance from one’s historical actors, to be skeptical.

However, many of these historical actors have been connected to me through the webs that extend from redevelopment throughout the fabric of my childhood as a Yonsei child in Los Angeles. This tension between myself as an ‘ingroup’ member and as a student became acutely felt in my interviews with Yoshimura and Nishida. Yoshimura’s exhortation that I would understand her arc reference to the social pressures of growing up Japanese American: “You know what I’m saying, you’re JA,”261 implies the unsaid knowledges and experiences shared by members of a group. Statements like this point to the fact that beyond words, so often the center

261 Yoshimura 2015.
of historical analysis, lies a realm of non-verbalized knowledge, truths that do not have to be said, or truths that are still unspeakable. Where do these fit into history? Is their inclusion at odds with historical validity? At other times I felt like I was being asked to make a choice, to take a stand. During my interview with Nishida he told me, “Why is J-town important? Because we gotta have a place in America that we can call our furusato.”262 Who is ‘we’ in this statement? Is it Japanese American radicals? Is it an amorphous community? Does it include me?

I would like to end with a reconsideration of the film Samsara. In my second chapter, I analyzed the film Samsara by Qris Yamashita, emphasizing the sense of circular time that characterized the film and the Sansei activism of the 1970s more generally. I feel that this thesis has been just another turn in this long cycle, yet another attempt to try and understand what it means to be Japanese American. Furthermore, in locating the site of Japanese American history in Little Tokyo, it contributes to the work begun by activist scholars in the 1960s to root Japanese American belonging in spaces between, Temple, Third, Alameda and San Pedro - our collective furusato.

262 Nishida 2015.
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