



Bronzeville, Little Tokyo, and the Unstable Geography of Race in Post-World War II Los Angeles

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BRONZEVILLE,
LITTLE TOKYO,
AND THE
UNSTABLE
GEOGRAPHY OF RACE
IN POST–WORLD WAR II
LOS ANGELES

By Hillary Jenks

ABSTRACT: The Japanese residents and proprietors of Los Angeles' Little Tokyo were forcibly evacuated in 1942. The district filled up with African Americans denied housing elsewhere. Its wartime name was Bronzeville. In 1945 when Japanese internees were allowed to return, the two communities, each with a history of race-based dislocations, made efforts to accommodate each other in a biracial "Little Bronze Tokyo." The efforts and frictions were reflected in the columns written by Nisei Hisaye Yamamoto in the pages of the *Tribune*, a black newspaper. A second evacuation in 1950 of part of the district for the construction of a new police headquarters injured the returning Japanese community but devastated what was left of Bronzeville. Bronzeville ceased to exist less from disputes between African and Japanese Americans than as a result of racist spatial practices by local government. In the immediate post-war period, however, both competitive and coalitional approaches to multiracialism made possible a biracial landscape. Both communities learned from the brief experience of "Little Bronze Tokyo."

*Bronzeville and Little Tokyo
have been betrothed.
Out of a marriage of convenience has come
a genuine attachment and affection between the two peoples.¹*

Little Tokyo, the downtown Los Angeles ethnic enclave located between Temple and Fourth Streets and extending from the Los Angeles River to the doorstep of City Hall, constituted the biggest and busiest Japantown in California prior to World War II (Figure 1).² When its Japanese and Japanese American merchants and residents were forcibly evacuated to remote internment camps in spring 1942 by President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, the neighborhood became "Bronzeville," home to newly arrived African American war workers denied housing elsewhere. Today, this historic district is once again known as "Little Tokyo." What social and cultural dynamics followed the release of the Japanese Americans from their imprisonment and their return in 1945 to homes and businesses they found occupied by African Americans? What interracial accommodations developed in this contested space? How did the identity of "Bronzeville" revert back to "Little Tokyo"?

In July 1946, a feature in *Ebony* magazine captured a key moment in this history: the article depicted the two separate ethn racially inscribed places occupying the same urban space, forging a single, racially harmonious home for new African American and returning Japanese American Angelenos. Neighborhood institutions appeared to model integration in action, with black, Japanese, and white doctors staffing the First Street health clinic, and black and Japanese American children playing together at the Pilgrim House nursery school on San Pedro Street near First. Photographs accompanying the article documented a variety of casual interracial encounters in the neighborhood's public spaces: Japanese barbers cutting black hair, African and Japanese American wives conversing in the corner market, and men of both races sharing a game in a neighborhood

1. "The Race War That Flopped," *Ebony*, July 1946, 3–9.

2. Koyoshi Uono, "The Factors Affecting the Geographical Aggregation and Dispersion of the Japanese Residences in the City of Los Angeles" (master's thesis, University of Southern California, 1927), 10. For more information on California's prewar Japantowns, see the California Japantowns preservation project, funded by the California Civil Liberties Public Education Project, at www.californiajapantowns.org (accessed January 6, 2011).

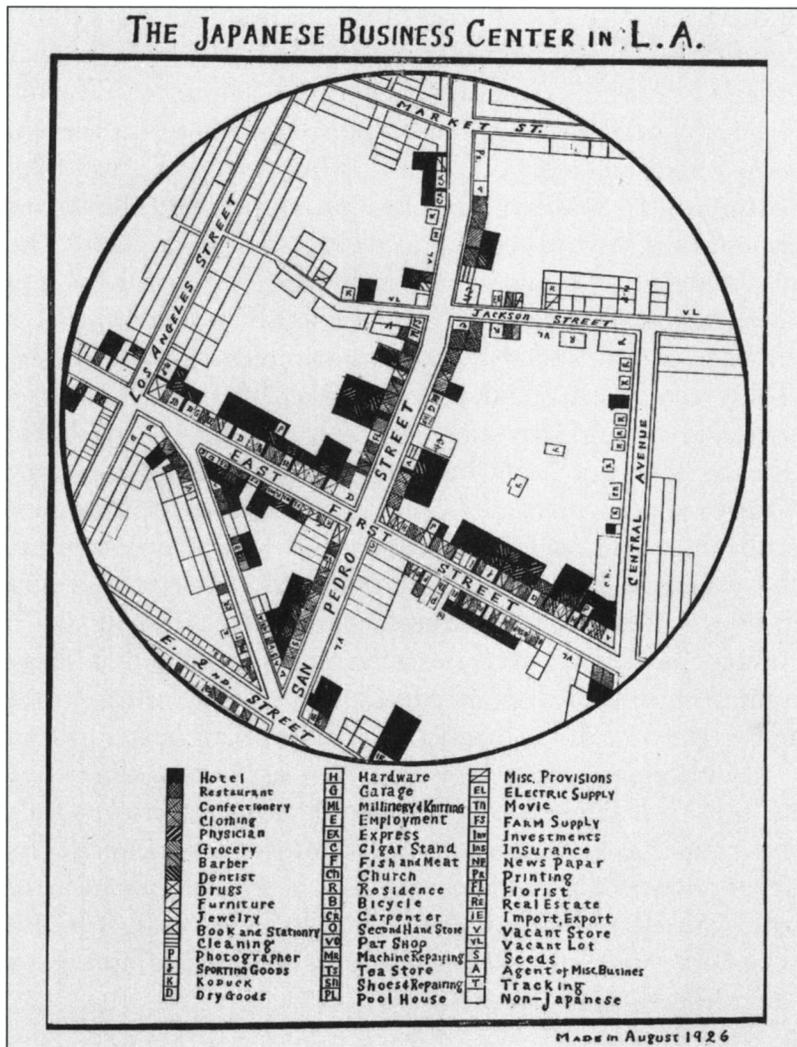


FIGURE 1. Map of Little Tokyo, "The Japanese Business Center in L.A.," in 1926. From Koyoshi Uono, "The Factors Affecting the Geographical Aggregation and Dispersion of the Japanese Residences in the City of Los Angeles" (Master's thesis, University of Southern California, 1927).

pool hall. Members of both communities announced their commitment to peaceful coexistence, with emblems in the windows of Japanese and African American stores proclaiming “We respect all,” and black and Nisei (second-generation Japanese) veterans cooperating on the neighborhood’s American Veterans Committee. The name of the article—“The Race War That Flopped”—alludes to the violence that many had predicted would develop between these two differently raced communities thrown into close proximity, and the spatial rapprochement that instead seemed to be blossoming on shared streets.

This “marriage of convenience” proved to be short lived, however; by the early 1950s, any sense of Bronzeville as a distinctive black community had been erased, and only the reconstituted commercial enclave of Little Tokyo remained (as it does to this day). My interest in this article is to uncover how and why such a rapid transition occurred, what the reemergence of Little Tokyo indicates about the changes wrought to West Coast racial formations by World War II and its aftermath, and what understanding ordinary African and Japanese Americans had of both the personal and structural forces that shaped the geographies of their lives. Given the complicated historical relationship of “black” and “yellow” as racial categories alternately desired and disavowed within mainstream US discourse in the years before, during, and after World War II, what did it mean for Japanese Americans to return to “their” neighborhood after the war? How—and why—did Bronzeville become Little Tokyo again, and how did African Americans feel about “surrendering” the space to returning Japanese Americans? What was the impact on African and Japanese American relations in Los Angeles in the years that followed? And what does this local story indicate about the larger patterns of race, property, and politics in the postwar United States, especially in the West?³

3. For scholarship on the historical connections between African Americans and Japanese Americans in the United States, as well as the inspirational role in which many African Americans cast Japan as a world power actively countering the European imperial narrative of white supremacy, see for example David J. Hellwig, “Afro-American Reactions to the Japanese and the Anti-Japanese Movement, 1906–1924,” *Phylon* 38.1 (1977): 93–104; Daniel Widener, “Perhaps the Japanese Are to Be Thanked?” *Asia, Asian Americans, and the Construction of Black California*, *positions* 11.1 (Spring 2003): 135–181; Gerald Horne, *Race War! White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Bill Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Despite a recent increase in attention by urban historians and ethnic studies scholars, the Bronzeville episodes in Western cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco remain understudied. The most sustained examination of African Americans in L.A.'s Bronzeville can be found in journalist R.J. Smith's *The Great Black Way*, which is nevertheless more centrally concerned with that city's Central Avenue district. Kariann Akemi Yokota's master's thesis, "From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back," offers the greatest amount of detail on the neighborhood, yet little analysis of the mechanisms by which returning Japanese Americans reclaimed Little Tokyo. A few recent scholarly works attempt to engage that question more fully; Allison Varzally, for instance, sees it as a space of "compromise and cooperation" that "facilitate[d] joint civil rights activities." Scott Kurashige, by contrast, argues that the community connections that arose on the ground in Bronzeville/Little Tokyo failed to translate into formal political cooperation due to differing relationships to the state and conceptions of integration that arose out of the two communities' divergent wartime experiences. While I agree with the broad outlines of Kurashige's discussion, I argue that the crucial questions of racial identity, political action, and national belonging were largely worked out *through* the spatial practices that transformed the enclave between 1945 and 1950. While both African and Japanese Americans exited the war years with highly distinct experiences vis-à-vis state power and integration pressures, they also faced very specific constraints and opportunities that pushed them towards coalition or competition in the localized context of Los Angeles.⁴



Many African Americans had lived and worked within the area that became Little Tokyo since at least the mid-nineteenth century. For decades African and Japanese Americans shared overlapping occupational spheres like domestic service, as well as residential

4. See R.J. Smith, *The Great Black Way: L.A. in the 1940s and the Lost African American Renaissance* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006); Kariann Akemi Yokota, "From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back: Ethnic Communities in Transition" (master's thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1996); Allison Varzally, *Coloring Outside Ethnic Lines: The Making of a Non-White America in California, 1925–1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 188; Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 158–185. See also Hillary Jenks, "Home is Little Tokyo: Race, Community, and Memory in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2008).



FIGURE 2. Shops for rent on a deserted East First Street, June 18, 1942, following the evacuation of the Japanese to internment camps.
Courtesy of Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

neighborhoods such as the area near the University of Southern California that blacks called West Adams and Japanese Americans called *seinan* or Southwest. Nevertheless, the two communities were in comparative flux in the years before World War II. The African American population, small in relation to many other urban centers in the U.S., began to grow more rapidly—from 15,579 in 1920 to 38,894 in 1930 to 63,774 in 1940. Meanwhile, the Japanese population ceased to increase through immigration following exclusion legislation in the early 1920s. The result was that the American-born second generation became increasingly significant as the growth rate decreased—the ethnic Japanese population of 11,618 in 1920 enlarged to 21,081 by 1930 but was only at 23,321 in 1940. Although some African Americans achieved a

degree of financial stability through home ownership, property ownership by ethnic Japanese was limited by California's Alien Land Law (1913, with additional provisions in 1920), forbidding persons ineligible for citizenship—all Issei—from owning land. African American Angelenos faced limited occupational opportunities and increasingly rigid segregation of public space and residential markets over these years while Japanese Americans, though still structurally restricted to a primarily agricultural ethnic economy, faced somewhat less intensive personal discrimination until rising tensions with Japan reactivated "yellow peril" discourses.⁵

The war radically altered the experiences and opportunities of both these communities, in ways that were not fully apparent until they reconnected on the streets of the ghetto/enclave. The "Bronzeville" period represented a new phase in both the complex racial geography of Los Angeles and the form and extent of state power—particularly in its deployment through, and impact on, space. Entire populations were classified by race, segregated, and moved across vast distances via federal mandate or fiscal policy: in the case of Little Tokyo, almost as soon as the neighborhood was emptied of Japanese Americans in early 1942 by Executive Order 9066 (Figure 2), it was repopulated with African Americans. Entering Los Angeles to find work in the many war factories, these newcomers rapidly discovered that approximately 95 percent of the city's

5. For City of Los Angeles population figures (County figures were naturally higher, especially for the ethnic Japanese given their extensive involvement in agriculture), see Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 7. Key texts on African American history in Los Angeles include Lawrence B. de Graaf, "The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890–1930," *Pacific Historical Review* 39.3 (August 1970): 323–352; Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Major historical works on Japanese American Los Angeles are John Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation: The Japanese of Los Angeles, 1900–1942* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); David K. Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei: Race, Generation, and Culture among Japanese Americans of California, 1924–49* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999); and Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival in Los Angeles, 1934–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Only Scott Kurashige's *The Shifting Grounds of Race* fully examines the two communities in relation to each other. Despite the arguably more intensive interactions of Japanese and Mexican American Angelenos, given their widespread involvement with agriculture and shared challenges as immigrants (though with very different access to citizenship), a comprehensive social history of the two communities in relation to each other has yet to be written.

neighborhoods carried restrictions against African American residency. Little Tokyo fell within the remaining 5 percent; as a result, its empty buildings beckoned as the only available and unrestricted space. Thus was Bronzeville born.⁶

Crowding was a serious concern, as 30,000 people moved into a space where perhaps as few as 7,500 Japanese Americans had resided before the war; other estimates eventually climbed as high as almost 80,000.⁷ While the rapid creation of a black ghetto within a few blocks of L.A.'s City Hall incited concern among members of the city's Anglo establishment (Figure 3), Bronzeville received much the same combination of coercive attention and not-so-benign neglect against which the city's other African American neighborhoods had been struggling for at least two decades. However, as 1945 dawned, city officials and Bronzeville residents faced a new and somewhat unique challenge. While blacks had always lived and worked in the area, it had been recognized from the early years of the twentieth century as an immigrant Japanese commercial district, and something more—"Little Tokyo" to Anglo tourists and shoppers, the neighborhood was *nihonmachi* to the Issei and Nisei (Japanese immigrants and their American-born children)—a claimed space of belonging within an American landscape that disavowed them. In some ways more alienated than ever from the mainstream American polity, would returning Japanese Americans seek to recover their symbolic home? And if they did, how would the African American newcomers, who had sought to put the space to much the same use, react?

6. Keith E. Collins, *Black Los Angeles: The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940–1950* (Saratoga, CA: Century 21 Publishing, 1980), 26. The same sequence of events occurred in San Francisco's Japantown; see Martha Nakagawa, "Housing Shortage" and "Other Japantowns," www.bronzeville-la.com (accessed Dec. 30, 2010), as well as Thelma Thurston Gorham, "Negroes and Japanese Evacuees," *The Crisis* 52.11 (November 1945): 314–316, 330. George Sánchez has shown how city and county government in Los Angeles responded to national economic and political crises in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s by (re)moving members of racialized communities, rewriting the city's racial geography in the process. See chapter four of *Bridging Borders, Remaking Community: Racial Interaction in Boyle Heights, California in the 20th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming). For an overview of the changes World War II wrought on the urban West more generally, see Gerald Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
7. Kevin Allen Leonard, "Years of Hope, Days of Fear: The Impact of World War II on Race Relations in Los Angeles" (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 1992), 70; Dorothy Baruch, "Sleep Comes Hard," *The Nation* 160.4 (January 27, 1945), 95.



FIGURE 3. With City Hall in the background, Mayor Fletcher Bowron (*rear, second from left*), Dr. George M. Uhl, city health officer, and Nicola Giulli (*second from right*), chairman of the City Housing Authority, pose with residents of Bronzeville in May 1944 in front of a former Shinto shrine to publicize a city cleanup campaign of the overcrowded sector that had formerly been Little Tokyo. *Courtesy of Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.*

“BACK LIVING LIKE MEXICANS USED TO”:

THE JAPANESE AMERICAN RETURN TO THE WEST COAST

On December 17, 1944, the Western Defense Command responded to the Supreme Court's *Korematsu* decision by issuing Public Proclamation No. 21, lifting the exclusion order that had removed nearly 120,000 persons of Japanese descent from the western coastal regions in spring 1942. As of January 2, 1945, Japanese Americans were free to return to Little Tokyo, although the War Relocation Authority (WRA) actively discouraged clustering in the prewar ethnic enclaves. Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron met with returning evacuees and assured them of their safety, even as he privately wrote to one of President Franklin Roosevelt's aides that “the happiest and most desirable solution of the problem” would be for the Japanese to resettle elsewhere as, given the economic and demographic changes produced by the war, “it will be very difficult indeed to absorb any considerable proportion of the original Japanese population.”⁸

The Japanese had reason to fear returning to the West Coast, given threats of vigilante violence and the expectation of renewed occupational discrimination. But for most Japanese Americans, the West Coast was the only home they had ever known. Especially for the Issei, the West Coast held old friends, community institutions that could be revitalized, and whatever property or investments they had been able to retain; it was, as Harry Honda said, the place where “they felt much more comfortable living.” Even those Nisei successfully resettled on the East Coast and in the Midwest during the war often returned to California within a few years to assist their aging parents. By the end of 1946, the WRA estimated that 60 percent of the prewar L.A. County Japanese population—between 25,000 and 28,000 people—had returned.⁹

Although much of both academic scholarship and popular history

8. “Hostel Opened for Japanese,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1945, A1; *Los Angeles Times* clipping, January 15, 1945, Box 92, Folder 5, Yuji Ichioka Papers, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles; Letter from Bowron to William H. McReynolds, January 26, 1945, Box 1, 1945 Folder, Fletcher Bowron Collection, Huntington Library. For more on Bowron's relationship to the Japanese American community, see Abraham Hoffman, “The Conscience of a Public Official: Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron and Japanese Removal,” *Southern California Quarterly* 92.3 (Fall 2010): 243–274.
9. Harry Honda, interviewed by Sojin Kim, Leslie Ito, and Cynthia Togani for the REgenerations Oral History Project, April 1, 1998 and June 17, 1999, Hirasaki National Resource Center, Japanese American National Museum (hereafter JANM); “People in Motion: The Postwar Adjustment of the Evacuated Japanese Americans,” War Agency Liquidation Unit Report (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947): 82, Box 3, Folder 22, Japanese American Internment (hereafter) Collection, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

has focused on the trauma of evacuation and the camp experience, the resettlement period was in some ways no less difficult for Japanese Americans. Tetsuden Kashima has argued that “the years between 1945 and 1955, instead of being seen as a transition period, should be viewed as a crisis period.”¹⁰ Japanese Americans in Los Angeles faced the daunting prospect of starting over economically as an ethnoracial minority with allegedly suspect loyalty, in a congested urban center with a history of racial discrimination and violence. The city presented returnees with a severe housing shortage, an uncertain employment picture, and organized anti-Japanese movements—enormous obstacles to be surmounted if Japanese Americans were to rebuild anything like the stable community that had existed before the war. After the multiple uprootings of the internment experience, many Japanese Americans longed to regain a measure of security and permanence and looked to the familiar environs of Little Tokyo, with its churches and temples, as a key refuge during the crisis of resettlement. But would Little Tokyo ever again “belong” to them?

The first hurdle Japanese Americans faced in resurrecting Little Tokyo was not, in fact, the newly resident African American population. Rather, discriminatory structural barriers to entrepreneurship and ownership that had either stunted Japanese American ambitions prior to Pearl Harbor or had been elaborated during the war years interfered with efforts to reestablish the prewar commercial enclave. Japanese Americans returning to Los Angeles found it impossible to secure business licenses or purchase insurance, and were dogged with unreasonable property tax demands. For instance, Los Angeles County insisted that the Koyasan Buddhist temple on East First Street owed \$5,000 in unpaid property taxes. The county’s twisted logic supporting this claim proposed that the temple had lost its right to a church exemption because it had not fulfilled its religious purpose during the war (when the entire congregation was interned elsewhere), and that as a hostel for returning Japanese Americans it was now performing a for-profit function. The temple board had to work out a plan to pay in installments to prevent the county from seizing the building, which had only been constructed in 1940.¹¹

10. Tetsuden Kashima, “Japanese American Internees Return, 1945 to 1955: Readjustment and Social Amnesia,” *Phylon* 41.2 (1980): 107–115, 108.

11. “Some Problems Facing a Community Dealing with Americans of Japanese Ancestry and Japanese Aliens after WRA Terminates,” undated, Box 74, Japanese Relations—1945 Folder, John Anson Ford (hereafter JAF) Collection, Huntington Library; *Koyasan Buddhist Temple, 1912–1962* (Los Angeles: Koyasan Betsuin, 1974): 187.

Returning Japanese Americans could little afford such injustices—they were released from camp with enough money to cover just one month of living expenses, in addition to whatever savings and property they retained. The economic impact of internment had been severe, with one early accounting of evacuation losses showing 3,297 persons, half of them in L.A. County, filing property claims totaling \$65 million.¹² The county's Bureau of Public Assistance found itself overwhelmed by the number of Japanese Americans seeking relief in late 1945 and early 1946; although the numbers rapidly declined after that, the total reached a plateau in 1947 at a number far higher than anything that had been seen prior to the war. The vertically integrated network of produce growers, wholesalers, and retailers that formed the backbone of the prewar Japanese American economy had been utterly demolished; many of the fields previously leased by farmers were now sought by developers planning the region's postwar housing boom. Although the growers and wholesalers regained some of their previous market share, the retailers could not. For instance, before the war there were 1,000 Japanese-operated retail produce outlets in L.A. County; 75 percent of all such stores. By December 1946, only about thirty of these stores had been reestablished.¹³

This situation forced most returning Japanese Americans out of the ethnic economy and into the general employment market, with the result that whereas 10 to 20 percent of Japanese American Angelenos worked for whites in 1940, that number had risen to 70 percent by 1948. Contract gardening—primarily for Anglo homeowners—became a particularly attractive occupational choice for returning Japanese Americans, as the cost of entry was low and the explosion in suburban postwar home construction produced a growing market for landscapers. The WRA reported that, prior to the war, approximately 2,000 Japanese American gardeners earned an average of \$125 a month; by 1946, there were “3000 or more and earnings of \$400 to \$600 were not unusual.” By the late 1940s, one-third to one-half of all Japanese American men in Los Angeles worked as gardeners.

12. “Bowron Says Nisei Evacuated Too Suddenly Here in Last War,” *Los Angeles Daily Journal*, September 3, 1954, Box 52, Folder 1, Bowron Collection, Huntington Library. This figure fails to consider additional damages such as lost wages.

13. Leonard Bloom and Ruth Reimer, *Removal and Return: The Socio-Economic Effects of the War on Japanese Americans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 63; “People in Motion,” War Agency Liquidation Unit Report, 62.

However, the report also noted that the source of this income lay entirely with whites, making it imperative for Japanese Americans to collectively remain in Anglos' racial good graces.¹⁴

The sense of insecurity produced by this economic dependence on white employers was exacerbated by Japanese Americans' alienation from emergent civil rights coalitions centered in labor politics. Whereas shared experiences on the production line and in Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions helped black Angelenos to envision a common political identity with Mexican Americans in the postwar industrial democracy, Japanese Americans—marooned in distant internment camps—were largely absent from this collective construction. For example, the CIO had a Minorities Committee that focused on improving relations among whites, blacks, and Mexicans in Los Angeles. With Japanese Americans absent and Chinese and Korean Americans few in number in Southern California (especially in industrial employment), and Filipinos often lumped in with Mexican Americans, the issue of relations with Asian American groups never arose. Likewise, the race riots that shook Los Angeles and Detroit in the summer of 1943 prompted the establishment of several non-profit and government entities charged with promoting positive interracial relations as part of the war effort, all of which initially ignored local Asian Americans. Los Angeles had, among others, the city's Committee on Home Front Unity, the County Committee on Human Relations, and the California Council for Civic Unity, a subchapter of the national American Council on Race Relations. The last of these sponsored a series of educational evenings in the summer of 1944 "intended to sugar-coat the educational pill with a liberal portion of entertainment." The six thematically organized evenings focused on Negroes, Mexicans, Jews, Middle Europeans, Okies and Arkies, and Americans All—but no Asians.¹⁵

The housing situation for returning internees was dire, and there were limited options in Bronzeville. The WRA estimated that no more than 25 percent of the returned evacuees were living on their own

14. Bloom and Reimer, *Removal and Return*, 67; "People in Motion," War Agency Liquidation Unit Report, 93–94; Scott Kurashige, "Transforming Los Angeles: Black and Japanese American Struggles for Racial Equality in the 20th Century" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2000), 416.

15. See California Council for Civic Unity report, June 5, 1944, Box 69, State Relations—Civic Folder, JAF Collection, Huntington Library.

property; many of the rest were in crowded hostels run by Japanese American churches and temples, where the rent might be as little as a dollar a day per person. Residents at the hostels operated at the Koyasan and Los Angeles Betsuin Homba Hongwanji temples were some of the first Japanese American faces to return to the streets of Little Tokyo. Some families also found shelter in run-down hotels both within Bronzeville and in the Skid Row area along its southern edge. Actor George Takei remembered that his family returned from the Tule Lake camp to a “grimy, three-story brick building with a deep orange neon sign that sizzled and flickered,” living in two rooms whose “walls had brown stains so old that they were starting to fade to a fuzzy beige. The linoleum on the floor was cracked and torn.” George and his mother found this place to be “stinkier and noisier” even than camp, but Takei’s father reassured his dejected family by repeatedly reminding them that their quarters were “only temporary.”¹⁶

The return to a much-changed Little Tokyo was often a bitter-sweet experience, bringing home to the returning evacuees that their prewar world was indeed gone forever. Archie Miyatake said, “One of the first places I went to see was the place where I was born. But all the houses were gone, and it was a playground called the Bronzeville Playground.” George Takei recalled his mother’s response as they first entered Little Tokyo on the streetcar: “I looked up at Mama to watch her reclaim another memory. But instead of the happy anticipation I had expected, she looked shocked. I heard her whisper to Daddy, ‘So many black people here now.’” Reverend Art Takemoto returned to Los Angeles in early 1945 to take possession of the Nishi Hongwanji temple at the corner of East First Street and Central Avenue. He found his old neighborhood newly alarming:

When your first impression is to see all the bars and all that, it’s relatively frightening. You’re the only Japanese American there, aside from the Chinese restaurants. And I lived in the temple, and it’s a big building, and I’m

16. “People in Motion,” War Agency Liquidation Unit Report, 180; Evergreen Church Hostel pamphlet, Box 74, Japanese Relations—1945 Folder, JAF Collection, Huntington Library; George Takei, *To the Stars: The Autobiography of George Takei, Star Trek’s Mr. Sulu* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 70–71. Returning evacuees who could not find or afford shelter in hostels or hotels given L.A.’s severe housing shortage were placed in six temporary WRA camps at locations throughout L.A. County, including El Segundo, the Lomita air strip, and the Winona site in Burbank. These installations followed the model initiated in the internment camps, with community mess halls and sparsely furnished trailers or barracks. See Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 167.

the only one there . . . Often times I come home to try to open the door, and there would be several people sitting on the steps back there . . . I remember one experience. I just froze . . . they were sort of inebriated. So they're sitting there, but to have them there and—oh, what are they going to do next? You keep wondering and finally, after waiting, well I went to the door, opened it, and closed it. Nothing happened . . . You know, appearances are often deceiving.

This Buddhist priest's vivid recollection, fifty years later, of his fear at crossing through a few "sort of inebriated" African Americans demonstrates the degree to which many Japanese Americans had absorbed stereotypes of black criminality and violence from mainstream Anglo discourses. It is clear that Takemoto was disturbed at having to share "his" space with these revelers, although he simultaneously claimed that such daily encounters in Bronzeville forced him to reexamine his racialized assumptions.¹⁷

These economic, political, and spatial dislocations were understood in the context of L.A.'s racial "common sense," in which occupation, residence, and income levels were all thoroughly racialized. Mits Aiso lamented that "the Japanese are back living like Mexicans used to. They come back and find the Mexicans and Negroes in the position they once held. It hurts." In addition to losing their economic security, then, Japanese Americans feared the loss of their collective position within L.A.'s complicated racial hierarchy. It seemed possible that the internment experience, and the accompanying anti-Japanese rhetoric in both the political arena and popular culture, had pushed Japanese Americans to the bottom rung of the city's racial ladder. The submergence of Little Tokyo into Bronzeville, where returning Japanese Americans at first felt "out of place" in the refuge they had claimed and defended as their own, embodied Japanese Americans' anxiety over their alienation. Yet they returned nonetheless—an act which one Kibei woman described as "kinda like huddling together for safety."¹⁸

17. Martha Nakagawa, "Blues for Bronzeville," *Rafu Shimpō*, December 12, 2006, 10; Takei, *To the Stars*, 68; Reverend Art Takemoto, interviewed by James Gatewood for the REgenerations Oral History Project, May 19, 1998, Hirasaki National Resource Center, JANM.

18. Interview with Mits Aiso, September 9, 1946, Reel 108, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records (hereafter JAERR), Bancroft Library; Katsumi Kunitsugu, quoted in Yokota, "From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back," 63. *Kibei* refers to American-born ethnic Japanese who were sent back to Japan as children for their education.

“THIS IS BRONZEVILLE”:

BLACK BUSINESS AND THE RACE-ING OF PROPERTY

Despite lingering prejudice and incipient political and economic differences, Bronzeville residents were able to build on the tradition of prewar black/Japanese connections in responding to the return of Japanese Americans to the neighborhood they now claimed. On January 19, 1945, Bronzeville’s businessmen hosted a welcoming reception at the Rendezvous Club. When Kiichi Uyeda opened his five-and-dime store on March 30, 1945 (Figure 4)—the first Japanese American business establishment to open in Bronzeville—black merchants “presented him with floral pieces to celebrate the opening of his store.” Another delegation brought flowers to returning Japanese Americans a few days later, on Easter Sunday. These hospitable gestures expressed more than a sense of solidarity with Japanese Americans, however; they were also symbolic spatial practices that demonstrated African Americans’ claim to Bronzeville in their appropriation of the *right* to welcome Japanese Americans back to their old neighborhood.¹⁹

Black businessmen had made some of the strongest claims to creating and sustaining a black community in Bronzeville. The use of the name itself appears to be partly the responsibility of one of these entrepreneurs: Leonard Christmas, proprietor of the Digby Hotel at 506½ East First Street and the Digby Grill next door, declared in October 1943 that Little Tokyo had ceased to exist and that the neighborhood was now Bronzeville. The following month, he joined with three others to open the Bronzeville Chamber of Commerce, which distributed placards to the neighborhood’s new businesses stating, “This is Bronzeville. Watch us grow.”²⁰

Christmas emphasized the investments that local and newly arrived blacks were making in Bronzeville, pointing out that while “the property was practically being given away . . . it is difficult to secure help to paint and clean, but the operators are trying to clean the area. They are investing their own money, and plan to remain.” Christmas also emphasized the superiority of blacks as tenants over

19. “Negroes O.K. Japs’ Return,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, January 20, 1945; Leonard, “Years of Hope, Days of Fear,” 216; Martha Nakagawa, “Transition,” www.bronzeville-la.com (accessed December 30, 2010).

20. Nakagawa, “Blues for Bronzeville,” 10; “Chamber Set Up by Negro Group in Little Tokyo,” *East-side Journal*, November 3, 1943, clipping in Box 76, Negro Relations—1943 Folder, JAF Collection, Huntington Library. Christmas was originally from Cambridge, Massachusetts.



FIGURE 4. African American customers look over the wares in Kiichi Uyeda's Bronzeville 5-10-25 Cents Store in May 1945. Uyeda, an early returnee from Manzanar, was the first returnee to open a business in the former Little Tokyo. Here, he is assisted by Matsuo Yoshida (left). Photographer Charles E. Mace. *Courtesy of War Relocation Authority collection, no. H-648, Vol. 45, sect. E. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.*

the Japanese. "The proprietors found filth when they moved into the community, and have been trying ever since to clean the premises," he said, wondering "why such filth was allowed among the Japanese."²¹ Within two months, the Chamber could boast 125 members. Sponsoring events such as a 1943 Halloween party attended by 800 residents and a Miss Bronzeville beauty pageant, the Chamber was an early effort at harnessing the entrepreneurial spirit of Bronzeville's business operators to the creation of community. As one report by the philanthropic Haynes Foundation put it, the Chamber "in a remarkable way, created a 'neighborhood' out of the unintegrated mass of immigrants settling in that area . . . giving dignity and a sense of security to the business people, and, through them, to the . . . residents in that section." This report likely overstates the degree to which the wellbeing of Bronzeville's residents was reliant on the status of its striving merchants; nevertheless, the actions of the Chamber demonstrate a desire to will an alternative Bronzeville into being, to create a real and rooted home for black newcomers to Los Angeles.²²

Some of the neighborhood's greatest business successes—its restaurants, nightclubs, and breakfast clubs—were also its most significant cultural venues, linking Bronzeville to key national developments in African American music.²³ The major sites included the Cobra Club and the Creole Palace (both at First and San Pedro), Shep's Playhouse at First and Los Angeles, and Club Rendezvous and the Finale Club, both on East First Street. As one L.A. resident recalled, the "nightclubs were great. Shep's Playhouse was nice, real nice. There was good music and we had a good time." Shep's was opened by Gordon Sheppard, a pool hall operator and former cameraman on black motion

21. Meeting of the Little Tokyo Committee of the Council of Social Agencies, October 8, 1943, National Urban League records; quoted in Leonard, "Years of Hope, Days of Fear," 72–73. African and Japanese Americans opportunistically blamed each other for the neighborhood's run-down condition at different times. The real culprit was more likely the area's discriminatory zoning laws and neglect by both city officials and absentee landlords.

22. Nakagawa, "Blues for Bronzeville," 10; Haynes report quoted in Yokota, "From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back," 60.

23. Although Los Angeles participated in the development of jazz—innovator Jelly Roll Morton "was certainly a fixture" in the city from 1917 to 1922—its significance initially was somewhat limited, in part due to its comparatively small black population and its distance from large urban centers of black musical production. Nevertheless, continuing migration, improved transportation and mass media, and the unique musical employment opportunities offered by Hollywood produced a lively and growing jazz scene along Central Avenue in L.A.'s largest segregated district during the 1920s and '30s. See Clora Bryant et al., *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Smith, *The Great Black Way*.

pictures, and featured engagements by legendary performers like Coleman Hawkins, Herb Jeffries, Marva Louis, and T-Bone Walker.²⁴ Probably the most famous musician to play in Bronzeville was saxophonist Charlie Parker, who brought bebop to the Finale Club in 1946 with a band of future luminaries including a twenty-year-old Miles Davis, Joe Albany, Addison Farmer, and Chuck Thompson. Davis recalled that “it wasn’t a large place, but it was a nice place and I thought it was funky because the music was funky and the musicians were getting down.” Jazz historian Kirk Silsbee has argued that “a trip to the Finale was a pilgrimage for every young, modern jazzman” passing through Los Angeles.²⁵

Despite the assured declarations of Leonard Christmas and the successes of black nightclub operators, Bronzeville remained a tenuous place for black Angelenos. For one thing, due to the Alien Land Law and discriminatory zoning and lending practices, ownership of the buildings remained largely with Anglos, Eastern European Jews, and even a few *californio* descendants. Also, competition for leases was fierce both during and after the war.²⁶ A neighborhood “professional man” later explained how entrepreneurial zeal and spatial restrictions combined to raise rents and increase business turnover, saying “What happens is this: one man buys a lease and starts a business. He does well and begins to make a little money. Then another man seeing his success starts talking to the owner of the building and tells him that he will pay him more for the lease when it expires, and also that he will give him more rent.” Even in the clubs, the spaces most representative of black economic success, the image of ownership was sometimes false. According to returning internee Taul Watanabe, the lease

24. Yokota, “From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back,” 55–56; Martha Nakagawa, “Breakfast Clubs,” www.bronzeville-la.com. (accessed December 30, 2010). With shipyards and aircraft manufacturing plants running three shifts per day to meet war production requirements, enterprising African Americans developed the “breakfast club” to provide food, drink, and entertainment to swing and night shift workers. Many of the breakfast clubs did not even open until after midnight, and served until well into the daylight hours.

25. Kirk Silsbee, “Bronzeville Gypsy,” *Downtown News*, May 22, 2006, 1; Davis quoted in Yokota, “From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back,” 56; Silsbee, “Bronzeville Gypsy,” 1. Parker stayed at the Civic Hotel (formerly the Miyako) during this period of time, struggling with his heroin addiction and his inability to secure a reliable source for the drug. In the early morning hours of July 30, 1946, Parker wandered naked into the Civic’s lobby and later set his mattress on fire; LAPD officers removed him from the hotel and he spent the next seven months in the Camarillo state mental hospital.

26. One report indicated that only 6 percent of Bronzeville’s property was black-owned at the end of the war. See “The Race War That Flopped,” *Ebony*, July 1946, 8.

for the Cobra Club was actually owned by two Jews, Paul Mirabel and Saul Goldberg, although popular African American Earl Griffin was hired as the establishment's public face.²⁷

This racialized ownership structure was a key factor in efforts to reestablish Little Tokyo after the war, as Anglo and Jewish property owners faced the question of whether it was preferable to continue renting Bronzeville property to blacks or to reestablish Little Tokyo by renting to Japanese Americans. The property owners and their agents overwhelmingly chose the latter, repeatedly allowing Japanese Americans to buy out the leases of African American tenants. For instance, Kiichi Uyeda opened his store after buying out the lease of a black merchant, and Roy Kito was able to reopen the Fugetsudo confectionary after buying out a lease from Mr. Nash, an African American grocer. Reverend Kingsley of Pilgrim House, Bronzeville's main social welfare institution, claimed that when the Japanese came back, "they paid 50, 75, 100, 200 percent more for the stores than when they left. It was Santa Claus for these fly-by-nighter places and they took them. These Negroes liked that kind of money." Such hefty investments by Japanese Americans just out of camp often represented the savings and wages of an entire extended family. Roy Kito insisted that black merchants "got good money for these businesses. They'd even ask around for Japanese buyers."²⁸

To understand how Japanese Americans began reclaiming Little Tokyo's business operations, it helps to understand the complicated layers of leases by which most storefronts in the neighborhood were attained. One building at 109 N. San Pedro, for instance, was owned by Sarah Hersh but leased to E. Jay Bullock, the president of the Eastside Chamber of Commerce, who had apparently purchased the leases to several Little Tokyo storefronts inexpensively following the evacuation. Bullock had then subleased the building to Matsumi Sakamoto after the war, and in 1948 Sakamoto subleased it to Carl Tatsuo Kondo. Sakamoto could have chosen to sublease the storefront to an African American business, but did not. Reverend Kingsley attributed this to a Japanese American policy of "unobjectionable

27. "People in Motion," War Agency Liquidation Unit Report, 86; Yokota, "From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back," 76; Nakagawa, "Breakfast Clubs," www.bronzeville-la.com (accessed December 30, 2010).

28. Nakagawa, "Blues for Bronzeville," 10; Interview with Rev. Kingsley, September 16, 1946, Reel 108, JAERR, Bancroft Library; Nakagawa, "Blues for Bronzeville," 10.

infiltration,” such that if “a Negro tenant moves out of a Japanese hotel, he is not replaced by another Negro.”²⁹

Other sources, however, make it clear that the property owners structured their leases in order to incentivize subleases to Japanese businesses and discourage leases for black merchants. Taul Watanabe recalled that in 1945 he worked out a twenty-five-year lease with an Anglo property owner for a building on East First Street, on condition that he sublease the building’s storefronts to Japanese businesses and “clean it all up within two years.” Reverend Unoura of the Japanese Christian Church maintained that “the building owners wanted them [Japanese Americans] back there. They had experience with both the Japanese tenants, and Negro tenants, and they preferred the Japanese because they kept the buildings up better, and boosted the land value.” Kango Kunitsugu recalled that “property owners had this prejudicial point of view that the Japanese tenants always paid on time.” The smaller postwar population of Japanese Americans in comparison to the still-growing, and still restricted, population of black Angelenos doubtless influenced the opinions and calculations of property owners, who sought to minimize wear and crowding in their buildings. At the same time, these landlords’ choice of Japanese American over African American tenants demonstrates that L.A.’s racial “common sense” was being actively revised for an altered postwar context. Apparently the exoticized enclave, now that the threatening connection to Japan had been defanged by defeat, offered more lucrative economic possibilities than the black ghetto.³⁰

This shift in the racialized calculus of local property values is demonstrated in a depiction of the neighborhood written the same month that Japanese Americans began returning from camp. In January 1945, Dorothy Baruch published an article in *The Nation* describing how, “behind the shabby fronts” where before there had been

29. Box 34, Folders 8 and 9, Japanese American Research Project Collection, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles; Interview with Rev. Kingsley, September 16, 1946, Reel 108, JAERR, Bancroft Library.

30. Watanabe quoted in Yokota, “From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back,” 77; Interview with Rev. Unoura, September 12, 1946, Reel 108, JAERR, Bancroft Library; Kango Kunitsugu, interview by Dave Biniasz for the Japanese American Project, November 28, 1973, CDPH, California State University, Fullerton. Clement Lai has documented a similar racial calculus underwriting the redevelopment of San Francisco’s Fillmore district beginning in the 1950s. See Clement Lai, “Between ‘Blight’ and a New World: Urban Renewal, Political Mobilization, and the Production of Spatial Scale in San Francisco, 1940–1980” (PhD diss., University of California, 2006).

“bright bolts of silk, gay kimonos . . . shrimp and sukiyaki,” and “polite little barbers [who] bowed to polite little customers,” there were now “people who had come to work in war plants set[ting] up housekeeping.” The housekeeping she observed was deficient and unsanitary: “In place after place children lived in windowless rooms, amid peeling plaster, rats, and the flies that gathered thick around food that stood on open shelves or kitchen bedroom tables . . . Many of the beds were ‘hot,’ with people taking turns sleeping in them.” Even more than the physical problems such conditions produced, Baruch seemed to fear the resulting “diseases of the mind . . . delinquency, crime, and prostitution; disillusionment and a sense of not being wanted; resentment and unreasoning hate” that would “cause the desire for retaliation to mount until it finds release through the blackjack in dark alleys, the crack of a pistol, the flash of a knife.”³¹

Such images demonstrate that the imagination of even this liberal reformer was haunted by the specter of black criminality. Faced with a booming, restive population, Baruch seemed to long for the somehow less threatening forms of difference embodied by prewar Little Tokyo: the quaint shops and restaurants with “polite,” “little” Japanese, despite the fact that wartime propaganda had depicted such politeness as a mere cover for murderous intentions. Baruch’s article is one of the earliest indications of the Anglo pattern of representational and spatial practices that would prevail in the postwar period—one that would affect Japanese and African American Angelenos very differently.

African Americans were particularly vulnerable to rent increases and lease buyouts as the bottom dropped out of Bronzeville’s economy. As US firms began to restructure for peacetime production, African Americans were the first to lose their factory jobs, due to low seniority, the unskilled nature of their positions, or simple racism. Between August 1944 and September 1945, 170,000 Los Angeles workers lost their jobs; Douglas Aircraft laid off 90,000 people in one week alone. Unemployment in L.A. County climbed to 10.9 percent by 1949, double the national average. At the same time, even those who managed to keep their jobs found their wages failed to keep up with inflation once wartime overtime and price controls were eliminated. Adjusted for inflation, the weekly pay of L.A. manufacturing

31. Baruch, “Sleep Comes Hard,” 95–96.

workers dropped from \$54.74 in June 1945 to \$45.64 in December 1947, an almost 17 percent decrease.³²

As African Americans' purchasing power declined, Bronzeville's black-operated businesses began to suffer. The impact of unemployment and inflation was exaggerated by racially circumscribed consumption patterns; as Reverend Kingsley noted, "Negro shops cater to the Negroes only, while the Japanese shops cater to Negroes, Whites, and Japanese. In other words, when a Japanese comes into town, they go to a Japanese store or restaurant. The Negro will go into either Japanese or Negro owned shops." As a result, Japanese American commercial enterprises were rapidly reestablished in Little Tokyo, serving a black and Japanese clientele, even as African American businesses went under. Simultaneously, Japanese Americans slowly trickled back to their prewar residential enclaves in Boyle Heights and the *seinan* area, sharing homes and apartments with other families, even as African Americans remained residentially constrained and continued to live in Little Tokyo/Bronzeville. By the fall of 1946, Reverend Kingsley was able to describe the neighborhood by saying that the Japanese "have their business here, but they live someplace else. The Negroes, on the other hand, live here, and work someplace else." Japanese and African American Angelenos shared Little Tokyo/Bronzeville, then, but on decidedly unequal terms.³³

Not surprisingly, the increasingly divergent experiences of African and Japanese Americans led to rising tensions in the neighborhood. Given the housing shortage, African Americans responded with outrage when Japanese American landlords, new subleases in hand, attempted building-wide evictions. Saburo Kido, president of the Japanese American Citizens' League (JACL), and Reverend Art Takemoto of the Nishi Hongwanji temple both recalled intervening in such situations to propose more gradual action and to reassure black

32. Collins, *Black Los Angeles*, 23; David Jason Leonard, "No Jews and No Coloreds are Welcome in this Town: Constructing Coalitions in Post/War Los Angeles" (PhD diss., University of California, 2002), 313; Kurashige, "Transforming Los Angeles," 404–405.

33. "People in Motion," War Agency Liquidation Unit Report, 98; Interview with Rev. Kingsley, September 16, 1946, Reel 108, JAERR, Bancroft Library. On p. 97 of the federal report, a Japanese businessman noted that 60–70 percent of his customers were black. The collective Nikkei effort to support Japanese American businesses had multiple motivations: Japanese language facility for the Issei, extended credit options for co-ethnics sharing the traumatic challenges of resettlement, and possibly a distrust of white-initiated "integration" initiatives, which many Japanese Americans found coercive. See Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 178–183.

tenants of Japanese Americans' good intentions. One Little Tokyo scholar has cryptically referred to another landlord who began carrying a gun after an encounter with angry evicted tenants. In addition to businesses and residences, black community institutions in Bronzeville also received eviction notices. A Baptist church housed in the Betsuin Hompa Hongwanji sanctuary faced eviction when the Buddhist congregation sought to reoccupy the space; the Baptist minister, believing his church had placed a down payment towards purchase of the building, threatened to sue.³⁴

An even larger uproar followed efforts by the congregation of Japanese Union Church to recover their building from Pilgrim House. Japanese Americans had raised money for the building's construction and maintained partial ownership, along with the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches. Although Pilgrim House was given a year to find new quarters, the *Tribune* called the request a "conscienceless action" and insisted that the "Japanese have resisted efforts of the center to serve them," and had endangered its Community Chest funding by calling for the move. Black-Japanese relations were referred to as an "armed truce." Thus, while the differing relationships to the state and conceptions of integration that emerged from Japanese and African Americans' divergent wartime experiences certainly played a role in postwar conflicts between the two communities, experiences on the ground with L.A.'s unstable racial hierarchy and its material consequences also played a significant role in impeding efforts to make common cause toward political and economic change. However, the specific and local interactions that occurred on that same contested ground, and the efforts of both African and Japanese Americans to make sense of the challenges they faced, also made it possible in limited ways to *transcend* those divisions.³⁵

34. Nakagawa, "Transition," www.bronzeville-la.com; Reverend Art Takemoto, interviewed by James Gatewood for the REgenerations Oral History Project, May 19, 1998, Hirasaki National Resource Center, JANM; Bill Mason, interviewed by Ken Hongo, May 15, 1973, "Little Tokyo" file, Hirasaki National Resource Center, JANM; "Japs Plan Return to Little Tokyo," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1944, 1.

35. Pilgrim House was able to move to a building occupied by a Filipino Christian church on North Los Angeles Street in mid-1948. "Minority Unity," *Los Angeles Tribune*, December 6, 1947, 17; "Japanese Ask Negro Removal from 1st St.," *Los Angeles Tribune*, November 29, 1947, 1. I do not mean to imply that the entire explanatory power for postwar black/Japanese American relations lies in these local encounters; in addition to different wartime experiences, Mark Brilliant has shown how civil rights coalitions in the postwar period splintered as different communities of color discovered that they faced different "axes of discrimination." For instance, while white liberals and African Americans focused on housing, employment practices, and school desegregation, Asian

PEERING THROUGH THREE VEILS:
NEGOTIATING RACE WITH HISAYE YAMAMOTO

As economic opportunities for black Angelenos continued to constrict following the war, the crime rate in Little Tokyo began inexorably to rise. In the fall of 1945, black merchants complained “about crime and vice conditions” to a representative of the Urban League. As black merchants were replaced by Japanese Americans, the racial distinction between robber and robbed became a source of tension. In addition, aging Issei became a vulnerable target for muggers. A police investigation determined that forty-two such “jobs” were pulled in three weeks during the spring of 1947. The Japanese Businessmen’s Association hired two Nisei veterans to patrol the neighborhood’s streets after dark, a decision that produced a wave of protest among black residents, who saw it as a vigilante measure intended “to force the Negroes out of ‘Little Tokyo.’” The Council for Civic Unity called a meeting so that the grievances of each community could be safely aired.³⁶

Reverend Kingsley, speaking on behalf of the neighborhood’s black residents, reminded those present that African Americans had done more to oppose internment than any other group and had not attempted to prevent Japanese Americans from returning to Little Tokyo. Kenji Ito, a Nisei attorney, insisted that the extra patrol was a response to what Japanese Americans felt was an insufficient police presence, and was not directed against African Americans. When asked whether Japanese Americans indeed intended to “move out the Negroes,” Ito’s reply was poignant and direct: “Japanese don’t believe in evacuation.” Assistant Police Chief Joe Reed claimed that “Little Bronze Tokyo” enjoyed more protection than other neighborhoods and that the trouble was the work of mysterious “outsiders”—begging the question of exactly who, in the neighborhood’s fluctuating context, qualified as an “insider.” Was it even possible to transform Bronzeville/Little Tokyo into a “Little Bronze Tokyo” where both groups could belong?³⁷

and Mexican Americans emphasized political goals such as approval of bilingual education and reform of immigration and naturalization laws. See Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941–1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

36. Nakagawa, “Transition,” www.bronzeville-la.com (accessed December 30, 2010); “Little Tokyo’s Discord Aired at Conference,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1947, A1.

37. “Los Angeles Minority Groups Join Hands to Make Brotherhood Reality,” *Daily News*, March 4, 1947, Box 76, Negro Relations—1947 Folder, JAF Collection, Huntington Library.

Many African and Japanese Americans made efforts to bring that community into existence, with varying success. Kiichi Uyeda hired black clerks, and Samuel Evans hired Japanese American waitresses to work in his restaurant, the Bamboo Room. Pilgrim House employed Nisei Sam Ishikawa to engage in outreach to the Japanese community and to advise its Common Ground Committee on black/Japanese American relations. The *Ebony* article quoted at the beginning of this article noted the determination of both African and Japanese American Angelenos to keep a lid on tensions and emphasize positive interactions. Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that the vignettes photographed for that article were not merely staged for the camera, but were part of daily life in Little Tokyo/Bronzeville.³⁸

Several Japanese Americans who as children lived in the hotels and hostels of Little Tokyo after the war have fond memories of discovering jazz and gospel music in black storefronts, recalling especially that they were treated as welcome participants in these locations rather than interlopers. Jim Hodge's newsstand carried African American newspapers like the *Eagle*, the *Sentinel*, and the *Tribune*, as well as bilingual Japanese American publications such as the *Rafu Shimpō* and the *Kashu Mainichi*. Hodge himself was embraced by both communities; one Japanese American recalled that "he had a nice rapport with the Nihonjin [Japanese] and vice versa. They kind of took care of him, and he'd take care of the Nihonjin." The *Tribune* shared its printing plant with the Nisei weekly *Crossroads*, and sought to improve on the inclusiveness of Hodge's newsstand by developing a shared conversation between Little Bronze Tokyo's two communities in the pages of the *Tribune*. Editor Almena Lomax covered Japanese American civil rights activism and hired three Japanese Americans—Hisaye Yamamoto, Chester Yamauchi, and George Yamada—on the *Tribune*'s staff.³⁹

38. Nakagawa, "Transition," www.bronzeville-la.com (accessed December 30, 2010); Samuel Ishikawa, Reprint from *Common Ground*, September 10, 1945, Box 74, Japanese Relations—1945 Folder, JAF Collection, Huntington Library. Anglo liberals, as Scott Kurashige has pointed out, seemed to be enamored with "the novelty of it all," although interracial encounters had long been the norm for the city's immigrant and racialized communities. See Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 173.

39. See George Morishita, "Little Tokyo, My Hangout," and Takenori Yamamoto, "Coming to Los Angeles," in *Nanka Nikkei Voices III: Little Tokyo—Changing Times, Changing Faces*, ed. Brian Niiya (Los Angeles: Japanese American Historical Society of Southern California, 2004): 35–36 and 40–41; Nakagawa, "Blues for Bronzeville," 11; Yokota, "From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back," 68–69. For selected examples of *Tribune* coverage of issues affecting Japanese Americans, see "Nisei Officer Weds Popular Film Actress in Japan," April 20, 1946, 21; "Nisei Citizenship Renunciation to Be Tested," October 26, 1946, 8; "U.S. Japanese Problems to Be Told," July 12, 1947, 3; "Japanese Teachers," September 6, 1947, 20; and "Orientals and Negroes Hit by Action," October 25, 1947, 1.

Hisaye Yamamoto's columns in the *Tribune* provide a unique insight into the challenges and possibilities of black/Japanese American interaction in postwar Los Angeles; her writing documented the diverging trajectories of the two communities in the face of changing local, national, and transnational contexts even as that act of documentation altered her own sense of racial and political identification. Ultimately, Yamamoto (or "Si," as Lomax called her) rejected some lessons from her internment experience and embraced others as she developed a multiracial civil rights consciousness.

Raised on a farm south of L.A. but resettled with her extended family on one half of a Boyle Heights two-house lot, Yamamoto's columns evoke the racially diverse geography of the prewar city that continued to thrive for a short while in the postwar period. Her stories are sprinkled with Spanish, French, and Japanese words in addition to depictions of black slang along the Avenue, and she passes on anecdotes about her Dutch roomer, her Irish violin teacher, and the Mexican American Encinas family that lived in the other house on the lot. All the same, Yamamoto confessed to ignorance about African American life when she first started at the *Tribune*, noting that she had only been acquainted with two African Americans in her entire life prior to evacuation. "After 9 months or so at the *Tribune*," she wrote, "the white people have become the rare ones." Now she understood "that when you jive, baby, you jive; that when you talk about ofays, Charlies, and ofaginjees . . . you mean white people; . . . that black and white are the main colors held by the palette within these men's minds." Where she fit within that palette was not yet clear to her.⁴⁰

Yamamoto was clearly fascinated at the insights into black culture garnered through her work on the *Tribune*, and she tried to make her column open a window into Japanese American life for the paper's black readers. She shared funny stories about her Issei father's restlessness and her hapless brother's vain attempts to style himself in the *pachuco* image of his Mexican American Boyle Heights neighbors. But she also brought in other Japanese Americans to write guest columns about their lives, particularly their internment experiences and their ideas about interracial coalitions. She translated letters from friends and relatives in Japan so that *Tribune* readers could learn about the

40. Hisaye Yamamoto, "Small Talk," *Los Angeles Tribune*, April 13, 1946, 3.

poverty and desperation experienced by the Japanese in the months following the war's end.⁴¹

Yamamoto also described Japanese Americans' experiences with racial discrimination—experiences that African Americans shared. For example, Yamamoto related how her friend “Em” watched an employment agency secretary leaf through a thick binder filled with openings before saying “No jobs.” In response to her inquiry, the woman confirmed, “No jobs for Japanese.” On another occasion, Yamamoto explained that she “nearly choked on her toast” when a white couple attending a race relations workshop with her pleasantly insisted that internment had been “too unfortunate” but “really necessary” since “in a group like that there were some who were planning sabotage.” The woman then patted Yamamoto on the shoulder and said, “This isn’t anything bad about you . . . I’ve taught many Japanese students, and they’ve been the sweetest, nicest things.”⁴²

As the only Japanese American on the paper with her own column, Yamamoto was sometimes called upon to answer for the Japanese American community as a whole. Almena Lomax wrote an editorial insisting that “Japanese-Negro relations do stink, Si,” and claiming that “the fact that the Japanese hasn’t been taken to the Negro’s bosom is his own fault.” An anonymous Bronzeville resident agreed, writing in a letter to the editor that, “in some Japanese business places, we are coldly received as if our trade wasn’t wanted, and in others they serve us with a grain of contempt.”⁴³ At first, Yamamoto suggested that Lomax was perhaps “hypersensitive about race,” defensively questioning why “she is holding me guilty for the smell in Negro-Japanese relationships.” Gradually, however, Yamamoto

41. Boyle Heights, just east of Little Tokyo across the Los Angeles River, was a highly diverse neighborhood both before and immediately after World War II, with significant Jewish, Japanese American, Mexican American, and African American populations. See Harry Honda, “Boyle Heights,” *Pacific Citizen*, May 18, 1984, 12; “Boyle Heights: The Power of Place” exhibit, JANM, September 8, 2002–Feb. 23, 2003; and George Sánchez, “What’s Good for Boyle Heights is Good for the Jews: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside During the 1950s,” *American Quarterly* 56:3 (September 2004): 633–661.

42. Hisaye Yamamoto, “Small Talk,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, June 21, 1947, 15; July 27, 1946, 13.

43. Almena Lomax, “Japanese-Negro Relations Do Stink, Si,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, September 14, 1946, 12; “The Mail Box—Negro-Japanese Relations,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, March 1, 1947, 11. These complaints obviously mirror African Americans’ complaints about immigrant Korean shopkeepers in Los Angeles on the eve of the 1992 riots, demonstrating the city’s long history of black/Asian antagonism over social relations in spaces of consumption, as well as the way in which different groups fill similar positions within the U.S. racial hierarchy as it shifts over time.

attempted to more honestly discuss anti-black racism among Japanese Americans; for example, she described the experience of one Nisei friend, Chester, who had discovered fellow black, white, and Japanese American waiters taking their work breaks in racially segregated groups. When Chester chose to eat lunch with the black group, he was harassed by his fellow Japanese Americans, who insisted that his actions were “‘lowering the Japanese’ and deterring the flowering of Japanese-white friendship.” One of his black coworkers then tells him, “I like you, Chester. Why, you’re not like a Japanese at all.” Thus Yamamoto admitted that many Japanese Americans *had* adopted negative attitudes and behaviors towards African Americans, while gently reminding black readers that they too indulged in stereotypes and had often condoned Japanese Americans’ marginalization.⁴⁴

Yamamoto sought to push the *Tribune’s* readers past the black-white palette to an awareness and understanding of her Asian in-betweenness, the neither/nor position that so often impelled Japanese Americans to reject political and social ties to African Americans in an attempt to secure or improve their own status with whites. Building on W. E. B. DuBois’s concept of the veil, Yamamoto plaintively asked, “How could I see clearly now, I . . . who am trying to peer through three veils, white, yellow, and black?” Although Yamamoto struggled with a stubborn reticence that prevented her from directly countering anti-black statements made in her presence, she engaged in an increasingly open discussion of the ways in which Japanese Americans were raced differently than African Americans, and the privileges she enjoyed as a result.⁴⁵ In one case, while traveling through the South, she related an encounter with a white woman who freely discussed her distaste for blacks with Si; the conversation is juxtaposed with Yamamoto’s conflicted decision to sit in the back of the bus while in the South but at the same time use the segregated facilities labeled “Whites Only.” In the same column, Yamamoto quotes from a letter she received from a drafted Kibei stationed in San Antonio, in which he declared, “we the Japanese are still lucky” compared to African Americans in Texas. At

44. Hisaye Yamamoto, “Small Talk,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, September 14, 1946; August 30, 1947, 14.

45. Hisaye Yamamoto, “Small Talk,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, December 21, 1946, 26. In one column, Yamamoto chastises her brother for not speaking out against the segregation of blacks in his Army unit, but she is clearly reacting out of guilt for what she has also condoned by her silence. Her brother responds to her admonishment helplessly, repeating, “It just ain’t in my line, Si.” See Hisaye Yamamoto, “Small Talk,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, August 30, 1947, 14.

home in Los Angeles, Yamamoto finds that the contractor she calls to fix her roof requires no money down, because “when we’re dealing with you people, that’s the least of our worries.” Had she been Jewish, she is informed, the contractor would have required a 50 percent down payment. At the same time, a black friend informs her that she had tried to rent retail space only to be told “no Negroes”—even as the store next door was rented to an Asian American merchant.⁴⁶

These experiences with shape-shifting postwar racial formations in the diverse local contexts of Los Angeles pushed Yamamoto towards a consciously multiracial politics. At first, her actions were largely private and personal; for instance, she threw away an invitation to a JACL event at Pilgrim House for Nisei veterans and their “Caucasian friends,” feeling that “an important Japanese-white dinner in a community where Negroes, Mexicans, Filipinos, Chinese, and who knows what other -oes, -ans, -os, and -ese dwell, would be rather exclusive.” Eventually, however, Yamamoto took her politics to the public sphere, participating in a racially mixed CORE sit-in to protest anti-black discrimination at the Bullocks Wilshire Tearoom, a then-new practice of spatial resistance to the racist policies of private institutions.⁴⁷

Her effort to peer through three veils simultaneously produced Yamamoto’s political mobilization, but it was not without cost. Since starting at the *Tribune*, she wrote, she “had become more aware of Race than ever before in my life, including the period (vaguely remembered now) when ... we were herded together and put on a train and sent away, because we all, under our infuriating blandness, were certainly secretly itching to poison water reservoirs.” The problem with race in America, she had come to realize, was more than just the experience of internment, a white-Japanese problem. Seeing life through the veil of blackness, she wrote, meant that she had “acquired things I would have been happier without, a bitter wariness in my association with whites (always now I look for condescension, always I find it), a

46. Hisaye Yamamoto, “Small Talk,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, January 25, 1947, 15; January 4, 1947, 11. Yamamoto’s columns provide a kind of first-person corollary to the more structural analysis of racial triangulation formulated by Claire Jean Kim, in which different groups benefit or suffer relative to their position on a matrix formed of constructed racial identity and perceived foreignness. See Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics and Society* 27.1 (March 1999): 105–138. I have used the phrase “racial hierarchy” in this work to convey a similar concept.

47. Hisaye Yamamoto, “Small Talk,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, September 14, 1946, 13; July 5, 1947, 15.

heightened sense of inadequacy, and new doubts of myself.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, in her unflinchingly honest portrayal of this painful process of insight and engagement, Yamamoto came closest to envisioning a space of shared belonging between Little Bronze Tokyo’s two communities and an alternate, more fluid concept of race and identity than those allowed by the political economy of property in the neighborhood or the rigidly hierarchical policies of the racial state.

THE SECOND EVACUATION AND THE DEATH OF BRONZEVILLE

In March 1950, Pilgrim House lamented that planning of future projects was on hold due to the “pending evacuation from our present quarters to make way for the new Police Administration building.” After occupying its new building on Los Angeles Street less than two years, Pilgrim House was again forced to seek another home as the city announced plans to acquire by purchase or eminent domain all parcels on the block bounded by Main, Los Angeles, First, and Temple Streets for construction of a new police headquarters. Nearly one-quarter of the district was demolished, forcing many newly reestablished businesses to move or just shut down; the impact was so traumatic that Japanese Americans today refer to the evictions as the “second evacuation.”⁴⁹ What Henry Mori had said about evictions from WRA housing in 1946 was equally applicable to this latest land grab: “the hurt will never wear off and the repetition of the evacuation has kept the wound open.” Yet, barely reestablished in the enclave and still in the shadow of internment, trying to demonstrate their reliable loyalty to state authority, Japanese Americans voiced minimal protest.⁵⁰

48. Hisaye Yamamoto, “Small Talk,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, July 27, 1946, 13; Dec. 28, 1946, 11. Yamamoto went on to become a well-regarded fiction writer. Her most famous work, *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*, is a collection of short stories examining Japanese American life in Southern California, with sustained reflections on the possibilities and challenges of building relationships across ethnic and racial boundaries. The final story is entitled “A Day in Little Tokyo.” For an in-depth examination of Yamamoto’s engagement with race as a writer, see Matthew Briones, “Hardly ‘Small Talk’: Discussing Race in the Writing of Hisaye Yamamoto,” *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 29 (2005): 435–472.

49. “Report on Pilgrim House Vacation Project for 1950,” April 17, 1950, Box 76, Negro Relations—Pilgrim House Folder, JAF Collection, Huntington Library; Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict*, 188; Murase, *Little Tokyo*, 19. The *Rafu Shimpō* newspaper was forced to relocate, while the Toyo and Olympic Hotels and a sumo dojo closed permanently. See Harry Honda, “Little Tokyo Through the Years,” Nisei Week souvenir booklet (1990), Hirasaki Resource Center, JANM.

50. Mori quoted in Yokota, “From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville and Back,” 80.

While the construction of what became Parker Center injured Little Tokyo, it proved a death sentence for Bronzeville. According to one estimate, 3,000 residents were evicted from the Parker Center block, 90 percent of them black. The enrollment at the Pilgrim House nursery school, which had been fairly steady in the postwar years, began to decrease rapidly as buildings were cleared. An enrollment of sixteen in the fall of 1947 dropped to ten by June of 1950 and then eight by the following month, when Pilgrim House workers estimated that “children are still moving out of this section at the rate of 5 per week . . . At the present time those who are being moved out are not being replaced.” The number of children participating in daily programs dropped from seventy-five to as few as thirty during the same time period. Looking into the future, the Pilgrim House Board sensed that the institution—and the “Little Bronze Tokyo” it had sought to foster—would soon be extinct.⁵¹

In the end, then, Bronzeville ceased to exist less from disputes between African and Japanese Americans than as a result of racist spatial practices by a local state that continued to view property associated with *either* community as less valuable, and thus easier to manipulate than Anglo-occupied real estate. During the brief period in which the spaces of Bronzeville and Little Tokyo overlapped, however, competitive and coalitional approaches to multiracialism developed by African and Japanese Americans in segregated wartime ghettos and internment camps were put into practice, altered, and institutionalized in the material and political landscape. Scott Kurashige has argued that, while many African Americans came out of the war seeing state legislation and integrationist rhetoric as the best means to dismantle discrimination, Japanese Americans generally evinced a deep distrust of state power and the implied coercion in “integration” to a white-defined norm. These beliefs drew on and strengthened an emphasis on communal self-reliance and rigidly maintained distance from other marginalized groups that pre-dated the war. Returning to Los Angeles, Japanese Americans put these beliefs into practice when they turned to contract gardening, pooled family funds to buy leases, and told Chester not to eat with the black

51. “Struggle for Little Tokyo Grows Heated,” *Chicago Defender*, April 9, 1949, 1; Pilgrim House Board Meeting Minutes, July 7, 1950, Box 76, Negro Relations—Pilgrim House Folder, JAF Collection, Huntington Library.

waiters. But Japanese Americans also exploited emergent shifts in their comparative racialization with African Americans to get better lease terms than blacks, evict African American tenants despite continuing citywide restrictions on black residency, and reestablish spatial control over Little Tokyo in the form of Nisei veteran patrols or refusing service to black customers. These specific local interactions divided Japanese and African Americans even as Japanese American-targeted civil rights legislation and rapid postwar residential integration removed some of the ideological differences arising from divergent wartime experiences.⁵²

Unlike Kurashige, other scholars have pointed to internment as the source, not of black/Japanese American conflict, but of a politics of multiracial coalition. Keith Collins, in his study of African American Angelenos, argued that the wartime experience strengthened ties between blacks and Japanese Americans, as “only Black and Japanese Americans felt a unified national policy of segregation, discrimination and deprivation.”⁵³ Kevin Leonard has written that internment itself was a politicizing event, particularly among the Nisei, claiming that “many Japanese Americans emerged from the camps ready to demand their civil rights.”⁵⁴ Japanese Americans in the postwar period put these beliefs into practice by supporting the efforts of the JACL, which filed briefs for cases that challenged school segregation and restrictive covenants; a smaller group called the Nisei Progressives, headquartered in Little Tokyo, lobbied the City Council for a Fair Employment Practices ordinance in 1949 and campaigned for the Independent Progressive Party in 1948 and 1952 (the year that Charlotte Bass, editor of the African American newspaper the *California Eagle*, ran for Vice President on its ticket). At the same time, complicated conditions on the ground in postwar Los Angeles pushed individual Japanese Americans beyond a politics centered on legislative or judicial civil rights to direct connection, direct action. Living and

52. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*; Charlotte Brooks, *Alien Neighbors, Foreign Friends: Asian Americans, Housing, and the Transformation of Urban California* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). By 1952, Japanese Americans had seen the Alien Land Law declared unconstitutional, the passage of a federal act authorizing payment of certain evacuee financial claims, and the McCarran-Walter Act, which removed the legal exclusions to Japanese immigration and finally made it possible for the Issei to become naturalized American citizens. See Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict*, 123.

53. Collins, *Black Los Angeles*, 43.

54. Leonard, “Years of Hope, Days of Fear,” 209.

working across color lines, a prewar practice now informed by wartime experience, pushed Si Yamamoto from a theoretical support for civil rights to the direct protest of a sit-in, and the veterans of Little Bronze Tokyo to the joint action of the neighborhood's *American Veterans Committee*.⁵⁵

One of the strongest proponents of a consciously multiracial Japanese American politics was journalist Larry Tajiri, who wrote before the return to the West Coast that "the racial nature of evacuation developed a recognition among many Japanese Americans that they were inescapably relegated to a place on the color wheel of America, that their problem was basically one of color." The next step for Japanese Americans would be to act on this realization, "to align themselves, wherever they go in their post-evacuation world, with . . . the mass movement of all marginal groups toward the full realization of the American dream." Ironically, Tajiri believed that this course could only be pursued beyond the boundaries of "Little Tokyos," where he feared Japanese Americans would apply themselves to improving their position within an Anglo-created racial hierarchy rather than destroying such hierarchies altogether. Instead, it was *through* their actions in Little Tokyo that Japanese Americans did just that, exploiting advantages created by the altered racial landscape of postwar Los Angeles in ways that would eventually participate in "Nisei exceptionalist" and "model minority" discourses used by Anglos to valorize Japanese Americans at African Americans' explicit expense. And yet it was also within the same physical, but quite different conceptual space that African and Japanese Americans most fully and deliberately negotiated the challenges of interracial solidarity, laying some of the groundwork, both informal and institutional, for the later Asian American Movement. Thus we can find the roots of the two major political and racial identities available to Japanese Americans in the decades following World War II not only in the internment experience, but also in their resettlement of the diverse urban spaces of the West Coast—in the streets of a neighborhood that, while it had

55. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 184–85; chapter nine in Leonard, "Years of Hope, Days of Fear;" and Box 18, Folder 18, Civil Rights Congress Collection, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research. See Varzally, *Making a Non-White America*, especially chapter six, for more on interracial coalitions in postwar Los Angeles.

ceased to exist by the early 1950s, shaped race relations in Los Angeles through much of the late twentieth century.⁵⁶

56. Larry Tajiri, "Farewell to Little Tokyo," *Common Ground* 4.2 (Winter 1944): 90–95, Box 88, Folder 4, Yuji Ichioka Collection, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles. The widespread dissemination of the model minority trope in relation to Japanese Americans, and Asian Americans more generally, is typically dated to the publication of William Petersen's article, "Success Story Japanese-American Style," in 1966. However, Clement Lai's research as well as my own indicates that it was a commonly accepted idea about Japanese Americans on the West Coast by the early 1950s. See Petersen, "Success Story Japanese-American Style," *New York Times Magazine* (January 6, 1966), 20ff; Donald T. Hata, Jr. and Nadine Ishitani Hata, "Asian Pacific Angelinos: Model Minorities and Indispensable Scapegoats," *Twentieth-Century Los Angeles: Power, Promotion, and Social Conflict*, ed. Norman Klein and Martin Schiesl (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1990), 61–100; Lai, "Between 'Blight' and a New World," 2006; Jenks, "Home is Little Tokyo," 2008. For more on the Asian American Movement, see for example Karen Umemoto, "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–1969: The Role of Asian American Students," *Amerasia* 15.1 (1989): 3–41; and William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). Finally, it is important to note that the significant lived connections initiated on the streets of Bronzeville/Little Tokyo were kept alive in many ways in the mixed black/Japanese American postwar neighborhoods of West Adams/*seinan*, Athens, and Crenshaw.