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Tacoma's Japanese Language School: An Alternative Path to Citizenship and Belonging in Pre-WWII Urban America

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TACOMA'S JAPANESE LANGUAGE SCHOOL

AN ALTERNATIVE PATH TO CITIZENSHIP AND BELONGING IN PRE-WWII URBAN AMERICA

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Introduction

“One thing all the Japanese that lived in Tacoma, they all attended the Japanese school. That’s what held all the Japanese community together...that I remember...there’s a lot of memories that I attach to the Japanese school there. We all grew up from young age you know, we grew up all the way to evacuation.”¹

“We didn’t mingle that much at high school. It was the Japanese school that really kind of molded us together. That is why we are so close.”²

These two men, both of whom attended Tacoma’s Japanese Language School as children and are now in their mid-eighties, made these comments during separate oral history interviews about growing up in Tacoma and the role of the Japanese School in their childhood.³ Every day after public school, the children would congregate at Japanese school for two more hours of lessons on language, culture, and history from Japan. As a non-denominational institution that was started by a parents’ association rather than a particular church or temple, Tacoma’s Japanese Language School (JLS) brought almost all of the children together in one building on a daily basis. Through lessons in how to be a good citizen and how to be a good Japanese child, the school became a critical space for the constitution of their identity and in negotiations over belonging. In particular, I argue that the school provided a critical space for Japanese Americans to construct an

1 Interview with Takao Jerry Kikuchi (with Joseph T. Seto), January 2005, Los Angeles.

2 Interview with Kunio Urushibata (with Ryo Munekata), August 2003, Tacoma.

3 Video-taped interviews of forty former students, plus two wives of former students, have been collected and transcribed, totaling forty-two individuals. Interviews have been conducted with Mary Hanneman, Assistant Professor, University of Washington Tacoma. I recognize these are memories of childhood from the vantage point of old-age and post-wartime incarceration.

alternative path to citizenship and belonging in pre-WW II urban America. At Japanese school, the young people’s difference from the rest of the urban world was affirmed and relished. Yet, the school could not solely be a space of self-making since it also was positioned in multiple frameworks of power and axes of difference. Japanese schools were targeted in anti-Japanese campaigns in Hawaii and along the west coast of the U.S. in the early 1900s. And, in Tacoma, the school building was used to register people of Japanese descent for wartime incarceration.

Based on oral histories with forty former students of Tacoma’s Japanese Language School (JLS), I argue there are three significant ways that the school figured in the shaping of identity and sense of belonging for Nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans. First, I examine the place of the school building in the spatial layout of Tacoma. The Japanese community was predominantly located in a spatially concentrated section of what is now downtown Tacoma and the school building was prominently situated in that area. The former students’ recollections of walking to and from Japanese school highlight how their daily paths became important spatialized moments of identity formation. Second, I consider the content of the lessons learned in the JLS, particularly in terms of shushin, ethics, morals, and discipline, taught by the principal, Masato Yamasaki and his wife, Kuni Yamasaki, a teacher at the school. Through these lessons they learned cultural practices of proper public behavior, ideas of filiality, and norms of not bringing shame on the family or community. Yet, it was these very aspects of Japanese-ness, and thus of difference, that also aimed to help them establish a space for themselves as legitimate and “good” American citizens. However, at the same time the school provided a space

for community-building and self-constitution – through class lessons, oratory competitions, school performances, and even being the site for Tacoma Japanese Association meetings – the school and the students were subjected to active discrimination and mechanisms of state control. Thus, the third aspect that I examine is the external forms of power that also defined what it meant to be a citizen. The Japanese School was a site of both self-making and being-made, two constitutive parts of citizen-subject formation (Ong 1996).

The building, in other words, housed critical expressions of difference from the surrounding non-Japanese urban world – a result of both discrimination and self-segregation – as well as expressions of similarity with others through a constant reinforcement of proper behavior of good and legitimate citizens. The constitution of Nisei subjectivity moved between these moments of difference and similarity, experiences of being both Japanese and American, and feelings of ambivalence and even conflict over this dualism or double-ness. The oral histories analyzed here also offer glimpses into how heterogeneous the community was – in terms of class differences, gender distinctions, native place identities, and even the desire to attend Japanese school. Concomitantly, each individual’s personhood was potentially divided, intersecting with multiple positionalities, whether of race and class or nationality and gender.⁴ Yet, many of the former students also expressed solace in their similarities, especially in this notably secular and non-denominational language school that brought almost all the children in the community together. Recognizing the role of this prominent, and yet contested, structure in the Japanese community

4 See Lowe’s 1996 discussion of multiple and hybrid Asian American subjectivities. Through Althusser’s concept of interpellation, she examines how ideologies may “recruit” people “as speakers or authors” (p. 145). Lowe cautions us to consider how “a subject may be multiply hailed by several ideologies whose conditions of production are heterogeneous and incommensurable or...a subject may be insufficiently captured by an ideological formation” (p. 146), an apt consideration for Nisei subjectivity.

illuminates how negotiations over belonging and identity formation in pre-war urban America are not only historical and political, but also are spatial in nature.

Recording Histories

I came to this project when I learned that the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT), which owned the building, had decided it would be demolished. UWT purchased the Japanese Language School building in 1993 from a woman who had herself attended the School as a child.⁵ The new UWT master plan encompassed not only this building, but also other parts of the original nihonmachi (Japanese area) in Tacoma. A review by historic preservation architects of the school’s wooden structure ultimately recommended demolition (HABS No. WA-209). They argued that major renovations would be necessary for safety, and that the extensiveness of the needed work would be expensive and would question its architectural qualifications for historic preservation status.⁶

Demolition of the building in the eyes of many preservationists also meant the university could be said to be complicit in the “dissaseml[ing of] Japanese American heritage” that began with internment and continues today with little historic preservation of buildings within traditional nihonmachi (Dubrow 2002: 4). Ironically, because of

5 Tadaye Kawasaki attended the school as a child. Her mother encouraged her to purchase the building, which she did in the late 1940s, see HABS No. WA-209: 12 and interview with Tadaye Kawasaki (with Yoshiko Fujimoto Sugiyama and Kimi Fujimoto Tanbara), July 2004, Tacoma.

6 In the light of UWT’s decision, my colleague and I embarked on this project to record as much of the life and experiences that revolved around the school in pre-war Tacoma as possible.

political mobilization by Nisei, internment camps are being preserved. This focus on wartime incarceration, however, has meant less attention has been paid to buildings that were a part of the rich pre-war life for Japanese immigrants and their children, such as temples, schools, and shops (see Dubrow 2002: 5).⁷ The physical deterioration of Tacoma's Japanese School building and the virtual disappearance of the businesses and homes inhabited by Japanese in pre-war Tacoma is a prime example.

The oral histories not only document an important part of Tacoma's history potentially lost with the building, but they also underline the vibrant life of Nisei childhood. Much literature on Japanese Americans has focused on wartime experiences and incarceration, thus understandably emphasizing victimization rather than the active participation of Japanese Americans in shaping their own lives.⁸ Roger Daniels (1992) notes, for instance, that Asian Americans have been noticeably absent from urban histories in the U.S. "When I did find something," he writes, "almost always about Chinese rather than Japanese – it was pejorative about nine times out of ten, often noting the squalidness of American Chinatowns, and usually the inhabitants. Even sympathetic scholars tended to treat Asian immigrants as, somehow, immune from most of the influences of American life, as victims of history rather than actors in it" (1992: 427-428). This article also contributes to those missing urban histories.

Japanese Language Schools

Japanese Language Schools were central institutions for many of the communities along the West Coast of the

⁷ Dubrow notes that "internment camps constituted the largest group of landmarks listed in the National Register of Historic Places that are associated with Japanese Americans" (2002: 5).

⁸ The oral histories are able to direct our attention, in other words, to what Yoo calls the "rich Nisei subculture during the 1920s and 1930s that represented a vital, alternative space between immigrant and native contexts" (2000:2).

United States and in Hawaii in the early 1900s, becoming "as much a rite of passage as the public schools" for second-generation children, and thus providing "an important shared experience for thousands of Nisei, ...reinforce[ing] generational ties" (Yoo 2000: 29). Beginning in the early 1900s when the population of school aged children increased as "picture brides" and children followed the early male immigrants, Issei (first generation immigrants) came together to build schools where their children could learn Japanese language, arts, history, and culture.⁹ The schools were said to reflect the "diasporic quality of Japanese American heritage" (Dubrow 2002: 3) because they were established by first generation immigrants precisely to ensure their children learned Japanese language and customs even though they were not in Japan.

There were many motivations for starting these schools, ranging from preparing for the possibility of return to Japan given Issei were not allowed to become citizens, to ensuring second generation Nisei retained cultural knowledge as families made decisions to remain in the US, to the practicality of making sure the children were able to communicate well with their parents. Additionally, many parents recognized the great discrimination against Japanese in the United States and knew that Japanese language skills would be important for their children. Often employment within the Japanese community was the only option, even for college graduates, as noted by one

⁹ By 1940, there were over 250 Japanese Language Schools in just California (Dubrow 2002: 109). On the schools see also Asato 2006, 2003a, 2003b, Kumei 2002. For more on the changing demographics of Japanese American society in the early 1900s, see Kitano and Daniels 2001: 57-71, Daniels 1992.

former student:

[I]n those days, I recall my father saying, "If you're going to college, I'll send you through college, and you need the money, I'm going to pay for it." But he would show me an example of some of the fellows; when they graduate, there's no jobs available, and what do they do? They work in fruit stands with a college degree. And he says "If you're going to do that, that money I have to spend for you to go to college, I'll give it to you right now. Get started on something.... My dad said, "If you want to go to college, take or major in something where you can be your own boss." And that's when I decided I could go into dentistry, have my own practice. I would be my own boss.¹⁰

The schools are also widely recognized as important sites of cross-generational negotiation between Issei parents and Nisei children, who had to manage the double-ness of their identities as both Japanese and American. This came out in a number of oral histories as the Nisei expressed their own ambivalence about going to Japanese school and missing activities at public schools (see below).

Scholars, politicians, and the general public have long argued that schools are important sites of identity construction and negotiations. Many education scholars have argued that public schools are one of the most important sites of Americanization and assimilation for new immigrants in the multicultural U.S., making the appearance of Japanese schools in the early 1900s a contentious issue. Merging with anti-Japanese campaigns along the west coast and in Hawaii that wished to "curtail Japanese land ownership and business success," Japanese language schools were targeted by politicians and mobs as evidence of Japanese nationalistic intent and the inability of Japanese immigrants to properly assimilate (Asato 2006: 85, see also Asato 2003a, 2003b). Conflict within the Japa-

nese American community over the schools also existed. Numerous community debates over the role of Japanese schools to instill Japanese nationalistic education or foster the process of Americanization have been documented (see Kumei 2002). Reflecting such internal debates over the schools, especially when they became the object of hostilities, some members of Tacoma's Japanese Association "considered this education problem a secondary one and that the Japanese Association put all of its efforts in the political arena" (Watanabe 1986: 56-57). This ultimately led to a vote to separate the School Support Society from the Association, so that each could focus on its own mission.

The Walking Scale City: The Japanese School in Tacoma's Urban Landscape

Tacoma's Japanese Language School opened in 1911 in a rented building with 13 students, by 1913 had expanded to 27 students, and by 1920 had over 60 students (Watanabe 1986: 54, Asato 2006: 90-91, Magden 1998).¹¹ The speedy growth of the Tacoma community in the early 1900s¹² and the number of children in the school made building a new structure a priority, even as owning land was prohibited for the non-citizen Issei in

¹¹ The school started with funds from the Japanese Consulate and donations from community supporters of the school (Watanabe 1986: 54).

¹² The Japanese Consulate first opened in Tacoma in 1894 injecting energy into the community, but moved to Seattle in 1900. By 1910 there were 1,018 Japanese in Tacoma, up from approximately 500 in 1890.

¹⁰ Interview with Ryo Munekata (with Kunio Urushibata), Tacoma, August 2003.

Washington State.¹³ The first rented space for the school was at 411 South 15th the second was at 510 on the same street, and the purchased land where the school was built in 1922, upgraded in 1926, and stood until recently was between 17th and 19th Streets on Tacoma Avenue (see Watanbe 1986.)

Most of the students lived in what is now known as downtown Tacoma, making it easy for them to walk home from public school, have a snack, and then continue on to the Japanese Language School. The spatial concentration of much of the Japanese community in this section of the city meant the children's educational and social worlds, and their families' economic lives, often were rooted in a walkable district. In fact, when the school was first opened, the newly established Language School Committee of the Tacoma Japanese Association divided the city "into areas to be canvassed for donations for the school foundation fund." Following the same grid pattern of streets that exists in downtown Tacoma today, the areas were 1] south of 15th Street, 2] between 15th and 13th Streets, 3] north of 13th Ave, and 4] south of D Street (Watanbe 1986: 54). In Tacoma, this resulted in a tightly concentrated settlement of hotels, shops, laundries, restaurants and barbers in the area between Tacoma and Pacific Avenues and 11th and 19th Streets. In 1930, approximately seventy percent of Tacoma's Japanese community lived in this neighborhood (HABS No. WA-209: 5, Morrison 1994: 30). For the young people living in the neighborhood, it created a strong sense of community, the need to adhere to certain

13 Because of the Alien Land Laws, the parents had to set up a corporation with several White supporters in order to buy land on Tacoma Avenue. They were Joseph H. Gordon (lawyer), Eleta A. Snyder (Baptist missionary who later became the English teacher at the School), and Jonathan M. Walker (accountant). The corporation was called the Tacoma Yochien (Kindergarten) (Asato 2006: 91, Magden 1998). The building of Tacoma's JLS also coincided with construction of a school in Seattle on Weller Street in 1913. It opened with 98 students (Dubrow 2002: 113). Seattle's school was, however, originally established in 1902, and was the first such school opened in North America (Asato 2006: 80).

social norms, and recognition of one's identity in a diverse urban setting. "We grew up in...a community," one former student noted. "We were very close, so close to the point where we knew the good things and the bad things of all the families, and we all shared our family life."¹⁴ Another man concurred, saying in his oral history, "I think Tacoma was small enough, and there were enough Japanese there in a fairly centralized area, that they were pretty close."¹⁵

Scholars have long noted the spatial aspects of subject formation, whether feminists critiquing distinctions between public and private spheres (Rosaldo 1974, Hayden 2002, Massey 1994), social theorists examining the intersections of space, power, and architecture (Bourdieu 1990, Foucault 1979, Davis 1990, Caldeira 2000), or geographers considering movement through space (Pred 1981, Hanson and Pratt 1995) and the "intertwined" nature of subjectivity and spatiality (Gupta and Ferguson 1999, Author 2003). Mapping daily paths forces us to consider the wider social relations shaping why people go to certain places and at certain times, as well as how an individual's biography is constituted by "activity bundles" and "projects" that necessarily have time-space paths (see Pred 1981). Thus, walking on the streets, from school, to home, and from home to Japanese school, may be understood as an important aspect of the constitution of their sense of self. One former student eloquently expressed this:

I remember, you know, we'd go to the public schools—classes start anywhere around eight-thirty and they would finish around three o'clock. And then between three and four we either had to go home and then go to Language School or we went directly.

14 Interview with Ryo Munekata (with Kunio Urushibata), August 2003, Tacoma.

15 Interview with Junichi Taira (with Mitchie Taira Hori), January 2005, Los Angeles.

And if we did go home, we'd find time to pick up something to munch on. And you'd pick it up, and then start walking to school, and whatever you had in your hand, you're eating it, and I well remember our teacher saying, "It's not proper to be *standing*, let alone *walking*, to be eating food." And so sometimes we'd cheat and we'd put something in our mouth, and walking the street, you'd try not to move your jaws. (laughter) And when I think of that, like I mentioned about 13th to 15th and the merchants, the owner of the business would be standing right there in the store, and they would be looking out, and as we walked the street, you see them, and they know you, and I know them. You *must* bow your head and acknowledge. You just couldn't walk by without acknowledging each other. So when I went to California, it was nothing for the people of California to walk and see another Japanese American person and not bow, because they're really strangers. But I grew up in a community where we knew each other, so invariably we would bow and acknowledge. And so to me, it was stange when they could not acknowledge each other.¹⁶

The streets between home and school were their playgrounds, filled with memories of sledding on snowy days, getting into mischief when going from home to home, and walking to the movies. Another former student described his youthful days in Tacoma:

Being a kid, you know...there used to be two movie theatres on Pacific Avenue—Shell and Cameo, if I remember right. And they used to have Hop-Along Cassidy and Roy Rogers. They used to have Flash Gordon movies. And so a lot of times I used to go to the movies by myself. In those days we didn't worry about you know, what's going on today, where we have to be careful about the youngsters going off by themselves. We don't know what's going to happen.

¹⁶ Interview with Ryo Munekata (with Kunio Urushibata), August 2003, Tacoma.

And so I roamed the streets of downtown Tacoma. And there was a place on 15th and Commerce on the southwest corner of that intersection. There was a vacant lot and we played a lot in that vacant lot. In fact, it was vacant until recently. I think they started with the building of the Convention Center. But they never deopped that particular corner. That was kind of interesting.¹⁷

Within this walking scale community in central Tacoma, the Language School became an anchor where almost all of the children went on a daily basis. As in Seattle, but unlike the majority of language schools in the U.S., Tacoma's school was opened as a secular, non-denominational institution. Most language schools on the west coast and in Hawaii were attached to Buddhist temples and Methodist and Baptist churches. The secular nature of Tacoma's school reinforced its role as an important center of community life in this city, bringing people from all religious and class backgrounds together. Even though there were tuition fees for attendance, some of the wealthier families covered the costs for their less well-off neighbors, a fact only revealed when the children became adults.¹⁸

Similar to other new immigrant communities in urban America, Tacoma's ethnic enclave grew out of a combination of discrimination and self-segregation. Restrictions on land purchases by non-citizens in Washington State meant more Japanese immigrants settled in urban areas than in California (HABS No. WA-209: 3). Washington's Alien Land Law was passed in 1921, although the law

¹⁷ Interview with Joseph Kosai, February 2004, Tacoma.

¹⁸ Interview with Tadaye Fujimoto Kawasaki, Yoshiko Fujimoto Sugiyama and Kimi Fujimoto Tanbara, July 2004, Tacoma.

prohibiting non-citizen land ownership existed even before statehood (Asato 2006: 97). Since Japanese in Washington State could not buy land, less immigrants in this area went into agricultural work, instead congregating in urban centers such as Tacoma and Seattle. One former student reflected on such settlement patterns and the effect segregation had on his social world:

The only thing I remember about living downtown was I didn't have any non-Japanese friends. There were about six families that lived on the same block we did between 13th and 15th and Commerce Street, and so they were the people I played with...and all the other business establishments in that neighborhood there were people who had homes elsewhere so their children didn't come down there. So when we went to school, we kind of hung around with our Japanese friends, the people we knew.¹⁹

The marginalization they experienced and lack of integration into the dominant society was reality for their parents as well. Thus, community churches, clubs, associations, and the Japanese school took on additional importance as social spaces where belonging could be established. One former student remembers that her father joined a Kabuki club. She explained that "the Japanese did not have much recreation whatsoever. So, when there was a cluster of Japanese [who got] together, somebody knew something, and they formed a drama club...and when they do this for twenty years, they get pretty good."²⁰ Mr. Kosai, quoted above, was more explicit about the relationship between a segregated city and the place of the Japanese school in their lives.

Because of the discrimination at that time, I believe... the language school and the [Buddhist] church were places for socializing, because they [his parents] could not mingle with other people socially. My father worked with non-Japanese, and our hotel residents were all non-Japanese, but that was the extent of it,

19 Interview with Joseph Kosai, February 2004, Tacoma.

20 Interview with Chizu Takaoka, March 2005, Chicago.

but not for socializing. All the socializing [happened] at these two areas.²¹

Similarly, the man quoted at the opening of this article said, "We didn't mingle that much at high school. It was the Japanese school that really kind of molded us together."²² It was also through the school that the community met for picnics and outings on the beach. The former students have vivid memories of being divided into "red" and "white" teams for competitions of tug-o-war and three-legged races.

Moreover, this was a city that had violently driven all Chinese workers and residents out of Tacoma in the late 1800s.²³ The Japanese community was well aware of this, and a number of interviewees remember trying to distinguish themselves from the Chinese for their own safety.²⁴ The dual process of self-segregation and overt discrimination is central to the constitution of citizen-subjects – "you can't separate the two" as one former student noted.²⁵ The language school sat in this matrix, and thus in an

21 Interview with Joseph Kosai, February 2004, Tacoma.

22 Interview with Kunio Urushibata (with Ryo Munekata), August 2003, Tacoma.

23 Clifford Uyeda describes this as "a dark past that haunted its [Tacoma's] memory. In late autumn of 1885, the homes and businesses of Tacoma's Chinese residents were looted and burned by an armed mob of white townsmen who were led by Tacoma's mayor. Some 500 Chinese were driven out of the city, loaded onto empty box cars and sent down to Portland. Time failed to erase the memory of this tragic event, and very few Chinese returned to settle in Tacoma" (2000: 10). See also Pfaelzer 2007.

24 For more on the significance of competition and conflict between Asian American populations in the constitution of citizenship, see Iwata 2005.

25 Interview with Robert Mitsuhiro Takasugi, January 2005, Los Angeles.

ambiguous position as both identifiably different from the rest of their urban world and as a safe and familiar space (Flores and Benmayor 1997: 15).

The students' daily paths, particularly in the spatially concentrated area in which they lived, are embodied expressions of social and power relations in Tacoma in the early twentieth century. Their paths reflect a segregated city, concerted efforts to build a Japanese community, the economics of family businesses in constrained spaces and during the Depression, distinctions between areas known as "lower town" and "upper town" (Watanabe 1986: 8) and the little joys of childhood games played in public, safe city streets. It is on these streets, through these spaces, and in the buildings of downtown Tacoma – most of which bear little or no marking of their pre-WWII inhabitants – that communities were formed, children grew to understand their place in the world, and negotiations over citizenship and belonging were enacted. It was in this space that the contested process of subject formation occurred, creating an alternative path to belonging.

The Preservation of Difference in Order to Belong

Self-identity and community belonging for many of the interviewees was established through negotiations over "proper" public behavior, filial actions, and identification with the values taught in the school and reinforced at home. The preservation of difference, learned in lessons about language, calligraphy, songs, moral stories, obedience and avoidance of shame for the family and community, was understood as a way to become good citizen-subjects. The lessons they learned, one man explained, "came first from the family...[and] reinforcement by the Japanese Language School and the [Buddhist] church helped."²⁶ These lessons both helped the young

Nisei understand they were different from others in the city – and special (i.e., respectful and well-behaved) in that difference – and that they could also fit into urban life if they followed them. One woman remembered being taught proper behavior that would also frame her as a good citizen – specifically, they were not to speak loudly in Japanese "so people would not notice us."²⁷ Affirmation and production of cultural difference in the JLS were used then as strategies to pass in the dominant society. Cultural norms learned at the school socialized students into being "good Japanese" and simultaneously into being "good citizens." This is captured eloquently by one of the former students when he said: "The Tacoma Japanese Language School helped me to be a better Nisei and also to be a better citizen."²⁸ Similarly, newspapers also called on Nisei to confront "racism by embracing life in America as loyal, hardworking citizens who would 'prove' their worth" (Yoo 2000: 74).²⁹ For many Nisei, however, this also meant suppressing their anger towards the discrimination they faced (see Uyeda 2000).

Masato Yamasaki and Kinu Yamasaki, the principal and the school's first teacher respectively, are central figures in any discussion of cultural markers at the school. The Yamasakis, husband and wife, moved from Seattle to help

27 Interview with Yoshiko Fujimoto Sugiyama (with Tadaye Fujimoto Kawasaki and Kimi Fujimoto Tanbara), July 2004, Tacoma.

28 Kaz Horita at University of Washington Tacoma, August 2003.

29 Many studies have noted the call for Nisei to act as a "bridge of understanding" between Japan and the U.S. (Fugita and Fernandez 2004). For more on issues of "dual identities" of Nisei see for example Yoo 2000, Pak 2002, Takaki 1998 [1989].

26 Interview with Joseph Kosai, February 2004, Tacoma.

the Tacoma community start their school. Mr. Yamasaki, highly respected, and sometimes feared by the students, was explicit about the role of Japanese schools in “raising Nikkei to be productive American citizens” (Asato 2006: 93). Thus, while parents sent their children to public schools for “school,” at the same time “they insisted on the Japanese spirit as embodying superior values” (Kumei 2002: 111, emphasis added).

The compatibility of “Americanization and Japanese language education” was a common theme of discussion among Japanese Americans along the west coast and in Hawaii. Education in the JLS was presented as important not only for cultivation of the child’s values, but also so that the Nisei could “achieve their mission of cultivating friendship between the United States and Japan” (Kumei 2002: 113).³⁰ Many studies have noted the call for Nisei to act as a “bridge of understanding” (Fugita and Fernandez 2004, Yoo 2000, Pak 2002, Takaki 1998 [1989]) with Japanese schools as the space where Nisei would learn the needed skills to fulfill this role. Americanization often assumes the inevitability, and desirability, of assimilation, which “literally means ‘making alike,’” and essentially predicts the shedding of one’s “native” habits and the adoption of the norms of the dominant society (Ang 2001: 9). The experiences of Nisei in Tacoma are clearly more contested and contingent than many assimilation stories would lead us to believe.

While Mrs. Yamasaki was known for her beautiful calligraphy and diligence, Mr. Yamasaki is remembered for his discipline and the moral lessons he taught the students. It was at a conference in 1930 that Mr. Yamasaki announced they would “add shushin (Japanese national ethics based on Confucianism) classes to their curriculum to teach values such as ‘obligation to the parents’” (Kumei

30 Kumei also notes, however, that in 1928 the “consul general of San Francisco criticized the Nisei for turning into ‘spiritual half-breeds’ who could be neither full-fledged Japanese nor Americans” (2002: 118).

2002: 119). The ethics lessons he instituted were “based on the centuries-old Japanese social code. Gratitude to your parents, he explained, should be deeper than the ocean and higher than the sky. When Nisei followed the virtuous life, the family would never be shamed.” (Magden 1998: 72)

This was a common theme in the oral histories. Jack Hata remembers that they tried “to be a good citizen, you know, stay out of trouble. I think that was basically the expectations of the parent, or the community. I think we were pretty well-known through the city that we were pretty good citizens, stayed out of trouble. I don’t recall kids being taken to the police station for any reason.”³¹ Mr. Yamasaki in particular was remembered as being “kind of strict. There was no, what do you say, fooling around”³² with him, while there was quite a bit of playful and naughty behavior with the other teachers. While at college at University of Puget Sound, one former student did a study of delinquency in pre-war Tacoma. “I went to interview social workers and all that,” she said. “There is not a record of delinquency reported among the Japanese. This is before the war, I don’t know about now.”³³ Clifford Uyeda, who grew up in Tacoma and later became the President of the JACL, wrote in his memoirs that the Japanese “had a reputation for not causing trouble. We scrupulously avoided physical confrontations, not for fear of losing, but for fear of creating an unpopular image. Though Japanese Americans appeared outwardly calm and placid, among ourselves there was no lack of angry expressions” (2000:

31 Interview with Jack Hata, January 2005, Los Angeles.

32 Interview with Jack Hata, January 2005, Los Angeles.

33 Interview with Kimi Fujimoto Tanbara (with Tadaye Fujimoto Kawasaki and Yoshiko Fujimoto Sugiyama), July 2004, Tacoma.

11). Another former student also said they would never do anything to reflect badly on their family or community. "It was very, very important to our parents to always behave," she said, "never do anything that would reflect upon our family. That was stressed at Japanese school also. The Japanese school teachers also lectured to us just about every day to mind your manners and behave in public."³⁴ When he visited the students' classrooms, Mr. Yamasaki would recite stories with moral lessons and lecture them on proper behavior in the classroom and on the streets, such as not eating food while walking. "In the Japanese school, one woman remembered, "nobody leaned on the table or slept on it...they were all proper."³⁵ Recollections also included how Mr. Yamasaki met with parents, discussing not only their children but also the standards of behavior he thought worthy of the Japanese community at large.

In addition, the school arranged for talent shows, award and graduation ceremonies, and plays that would teach the students about diligence and discipline, while also bringing the community together for a fun-filled event (see also Madgen 1998: 72). One such story was that of Minomia Kinjiro. This is the tale of a farmer's boy who was represented with an open book in his hands. As one of the former students said, "in order to get ahead in life, that's what he did. While he was carrying things to the market and places like that, he read."³⁶ Telling this story reinforced industriousness and hard work, like the boy who constantly tried to educate himself, even while doing his daily chores. The Tangesazen folktale was another story they learned at the school, a tale of an "imperfect" samurai who was might and strong despite having lost an eye and arm. "There was a meaning to that story," Mr. Urushibata acknowledged. "I can't remember, but those are the things that kind of molded us..."³⁷

34 Interview with Yoshiko Fujimoto Sugiyama (with Tadaye Fujimoto Kawasaki and Kimi Fujimoto Tanbara), July 2004, Tacoma.

35 Interview with Tadaye Fujimoto Kawasaki (with Yoshiko Fujimoto Sugiyama and Kimi Fujimoto Tanbara), July 2004, Tacoma

Repeatedly in the oral histories former students noted the impact these lessons had on them later in life, including their desire to stay in touch with each other and to have regular Tacoma reunions. For instance, one person reminisced that "my experience of Japanese school was very good because I learned a lot of...shushin (ethics, morality, discipline). I think that's the main thing...holding the Japanese Tacoma people getting together after the war and all that...that we learned that subject called shushin in Japanese School."³⁸ Continual and forceful lessons about moral codes and proper behavior, many of the former students felt helped them weather wartime incarceration and the discrimination they faced. Several former students even compared their Tacoma cohort to other Nisei, commenting that they felt they were better people and citizens because of the lessons the Yamasakis emphasized.

The school, and the work of the Yamasakis, carved out an alternative path to citizenship that used self-segregation and the preservation of difference, albeit a quiet difference, as a counter-strategy for belonging. Tacoma's Japanese Language School both segregated the community and helped to preserve it. This was not just a place that emphasized difference or pressured students to assimilate, but rather was a space that integrated these two poles of the immigrant experience. Ironically, learning to be good citizen-subjects required separation from other young people and common after-school activities such as sports, yearbook, and debate club. These tensions illustrate conflict with parents as well as the heterogeneity within the Japanese-American community itself.

36 Interview with Masatoshi Fujii, October 2003, Oakland.

37 Interview with Kunio Urushibata (with Ryo Munekata), August 2003, Tacoma.

38 Interview with Hiroji Aochi, October 2003, Oakland.

Heterogeneity and Multiplicity

While the core of Tacoma's nihonmachi was a spatially concentrated area, there was great heterogeneity of experience and opinion within the community. Some of the interviewees were explicit about occupational and class differences between families. Others commented on the experiences of boys versus girls, playing ball or staying home to help their mother. In one family for instance, the brother chose to attend Lincoln High School because it had electric shop and he wanted to be an electrical engineer, while his sister chose Stadium High School for a more traditional academic course of study, what she called a "more exclusive" school. And in another family, the girls went to the Methodist Church "because they had more fun," while the boys went to the Buddhist Church for activities. And in a conversation with two former students, they recognized one was the son of a peddler who was embarrassed to be seen selling vegetables with his father while the other was the son of a hotel business owner who went on to become a dentist.

This heterogeneity and multiplicity emerged in memories of the Japanese Language School as well. Some former students spoke highly of the school and how it brought the community together, but others remembered the school for denying them childhood desires. One woman said, "Everyday we had to go to Japanese School from four to six, so that prevented me from participating in any sport activity at school, which I kind of regretted, or was upset about that. But school was school, and...it was almost required that we go to Japanese school every day." Masatoshi Fujii, another former student, was more direct in his comments about the school.

I think there was one negative aspect of the Japanese Language School...The boys couldn't turn out for sports, after school sports, football, baseball, and basketball...because they had to go to the Japanese school....and I think it retarded the assimilation of Japanese into the mainstream of the community because we were segregating ourselves all the time.

I mean, certain part is okay, but geez, one hundred percent of the time we were segregated, except for the public school. Even in public school I always played with Japanese friends.³⁹

The school was a site of claiming belonging, but it nevertheless remained contested.

Targeting the Schools: Conflict over Belonging

Tacoma's Japanese Language School is remembered by many as a safe and familiar space that offered a place to form "a distinctive shared identity and the empowered sense of belonging it imparts" (Ang 2001: 11). On the other hand, the schools were identifiably different from the dominant society and as such became targets for anti-Japanese movements in Hawaii, California, and Washington.⁴⁰ Fueled by exclusionist policies and actions in California, anti-Japanese movements gained ground in Washington State around 1919. The superintendent of Pierce County schools, for instance, actively worked to shut down Japanese language schools in the Puyallup, Firwood, and Fife areas, accusing them of using "Oriental teachers" to instill a "Japanization process" in the students (Asato 2006: 88-89).

Thus, while it is critical we recognize the active agency of Issei and Nisei in constructing their sense of belonging and worthiness in the United States, it also is important to

³⁹ Interview October 2003, Oakland.

⁴⁰ For more on the targeting of Japanese schools in Hawaii and the significance of this for anti-Japanese actions on the West Coast, see Asato 2003a.

identify the role of the state in these processes – through campaigns to close down Japanese schools, Alien Land Laws, and registration at Civil Control Centers with Executive Order 9066. Therefore, in addition to relishing the positive impact of the Yamasaki legacy and the ways in which Tacoma’s JLS provided a space to make claims on the city and one’s right to citizenship, we must also examine how the Nisei could not “escape the cultural inscription of state power and other forms of regulation that define the different modalities of belonging” (Ong 1996:738).

The most explicit expression of this was Executive Order 9066 and the subsequent registration of people for internment. One woman remembered taking her mother to the Japanese School for registration. When I asked what feelings she had about registration taking place in the school building, she referenced obedience and her filial responsibility to her mother.

Yes, it was, you know, in the Japanese school, but I guess that’s where they – you know, at that age I thought, this is what you’re supposed to do so you don’t think about the ramification of, “What am I doing? Why are they doing it here?” No. You know, I didn’t have feelings like that. You know, when you’re kind of up in the air about where we’re going or what’s going to happen and everything, I don’t think – you just do what you’re supposed to do, you know, especially you know, when you’re supposed to be obedient all the time.⁴¹

As minorities with uncertain legal status and profound inequality before the law, belonging for the former students of Tacoma’s Japanese Language School tacked back and forth between active participation in identity formation and forceful definition by others.⁴²

41 Interview with Michie Taira Hori (with Junichi Taira), January 2005, Los Angeles.

42 In a moving published story of the night before he had to leave Tacoma in 1942, Clinton Butsuda writes: I slept on the floor, for our beds were given away. As I tried to sleep, angry thoughts filter through my mind. Why? Why is this nightmare

The childhood memories narrated in these oral histories illuminate how the walk-able scale of the downtown area where most of the Nisei lived with their families shaped their identities and sense of belonging in the city. Their everyday paths were acts of self-making, whether by foot or trolley car. Additionally, practices of cultural difference, institutionalized in the Japanese School itself, were used as strategies to fit into the dominant society, by marking the Nisei both as “good” citizens, and as “not Chinese.” Thus, on the one hand I have argued that we must acknowledge the active participation of the Nisei in constituting their subjectivity as US citizens, revealed in tangible ways in the stories of running from home to school and back again along Commerce and Tacoma Avenues, and in compassionate descriptions of the principal and other teachers at Tacoma’s JLS. Yet, I have also argued that these narratives reveal multiple opinions and experiences, as well as the profound reality of the lack of power Japanese Americans have had in defining citizenship and belonging for themselves. Stories from many of the former students about walking from their homes to Union Station to get on trains going to Pinedale Assembly Center and wartime camps underscore this fact. Union Station is not far from the downtown area and the school, “walk-able” by many, but a difficult process when the families could only take what they could carry themselves.

happening to me? I’m an American citizen! What did I do? ...Our last night at home we again tried to sleep on the hard wooden floor, but the nagging question kept me awake. Why? Why? Didn’t I try to prove my loyalty that first Saturday after Pearl Harbor by volunteering for the Army? You rejected me because I was of Japanese ancestry. You further demeaned me by reclassifying me 4-c – undesirable enemy alien! My self-esteem plummeted to zero minus. I hated everything and everybody...I hated my mother and father for being Japanese. I hated myself for being born Asian. I hated myself for even thinking these thoughts. I was so mad and frustrated that I cried under the thin blanket to muffle the sound. Twenty-year old boys don’t cry – especially a Japanese-American (1999: 121-123).

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