Introduction

The Problem of Racial Rearticulation

This study was born of the conviction, held even more firmly now at the study's conclusion, that our perception of American history is misserved by the image of Japanese Americans as a successful "model minority" group. The Issei and their descendants are certainly worthy of appreciation for having overcome intense and prolonged bouts of racial persecution, including the forced internment of 120,000 American citizens and permanent residents. But the many "unsuccessful" peoples (e.g., blacks, Native Americans, Latinos) also command our deepest admiration for having broken through formidable barriers of subjugation—sometimes merely by surviving and passing down glimpses of what they had endured. To speak of a model minority is to ignore the range of ways in which American racism has been experienced, engaged, and resisted. In such a discourse, the historian's craft is reduced to judging "success" or "failure" rather than the more enlightening challenge of understanding the past with all its contradictions and complexity.[1]

Antimodel–minority literature is plagued by a similar reductionism. Critics of the model majority idea turn the image of Japanese Americans as a successful minority on its head. Rather than applauding Japanese Americans for gaining mainstream acceptance, these critics condemn American society for failing to provide a truly level playing field for all races. Their argument underscores the persistence of anti-Japanese racism by contending that the radical decline in overt, institutionalized prejudice since World War II is a smokescreen, concealing clandestine

hatreds and discrimination in white America.[2] Japanese Americans, it has been observed, have continued to be victimized by racism and thus share a common experience with America's less-advantaged racial minority—"Yellow," one proponent asserts, "is a shade of black and black a shade of yellow."[3]

The critique of the model minority thesis is not wrong, but in blurring the distinction between Japanese Americans and blacks, it reproduces the narrow vision of Japanese American history as a process of success or failure. What explains this duality within the model minority critique, anthropologist Sylvia Yanagisako maintains, is the "tension between the desire of the founders of Asian American Studies to stand in solidarity with other people of color and the fact that in socioeconomic terms Asians Americans are more like White Americans."[4] That Japanese Americans confronted overt and entrenched racist institutions and structures before World War II makes it tempting to understand their response to racism within the theoretical framework of slave resistance. Doing so, however, risks relying upon notions of resistance made to explain power relations in vastly different social contexts.

The historical conditions for Japanese Americans on the West Coast were not the same as for blacks in the American South. The Issei and Nisei operated in racial situations in which they had a range of cultural, economic, and political resources at hand to contest and deflect domination. As both free immigrants and American citizens, Japanese Americans were able to challenge hegemonic assumptions about their racial characteristics through print media, public events (including Nisei Week), litigation, and formal conferences with government and military officials, even while they were interned during World War II. They also had the advantage (which of course was also a terrible burden during World War II) of representing a powerful nation. Through its consulates in the United States, the Japanese government guided and protected its overseas population, giving the Japanese American community in Los Angeles the imprimatur of diplomatic significance.

How, then, did Japanese Americans contest their racial predicament before, during, and after their World War II internment? What has been written about Japanese American responses to power falls into two schools of thought. The dominant perspective portrays Japanese Americans as trapped between the insularity of old-world traditions and hypermodern realities of American life. Its advocates maintain that as "marginal men," the second generation felt compelled to resolve their identity dilemma by rejecting Japanese traditions (often epitomized by

their parents' generation) in order to root the ethnic group more firmly in the white American mainstream.[5] The narrative is a familiar one in immigration history: the American-born children of immigrants gradually and willfully liberate the ethnic group from the language and traditions that have kept the immigrant generation at the bottom of society. Thus Roger Daniels, a leading historian of Japanese Americans, insists that Japanese Americans were an ethnic group not intrinsically different from white ethnics. The twist for Japanese Americans was that racism delayed entrance into the American melting pot that already included European immigrants.[6]

A more recent but less-developed revisionism sees a promise, not a problem, in biculturalism. Focusing on U.S.-Japan relations before World War II, its proponents portray immigrant leaders as cultural diplomats seeking to reduce misunderstanding and conflict by creating a bridge between the cultures of Japan and America. The revisionists argue that most Nisei accepted assimilation only because the repression during World War II made alternative identities untenable. In short, not all Nisei were assimilationists in the 1930s. Brian Masaru Hayashi finds a deep ambivalence among second-generation Protestants about choosing between American or Japanese culture and deciding whether to join their parents' support for Japan's aggressions in East Asia. Jere Takahashi pins this ambivalence to different political perspectives among the second generation: assimilationists, notably the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), a group of well-educated, second-generation businessmen and professionals, identified squarely with the United States and American culture, while other Nisei and *Kibei* (American citizens raised primarily in Japan) were either less interested in blending into the American mainstream or placed labor politics above one's cultural orientation. Finally, Yuji Ichioka contends that the JACLers' identity was more complex than their unquestioned allegiance to the United States suggested, for their assimilationism did not preclude support for Japanese imperialism.[7]

The differences between these two schools of thought are predicated on one of the central debates in the historiography of American immigration and ethnicity: whether newcomers choose to assimilate into the cultural mainstream or retain ethnic identities. The debate between "assimilationists" (the dominant perspective on Japanese Americans) and "retentionists" (the revisionist stance) has been reflected in the questions asked: When has ethnic or national identity been strong or weak? What factors in American history have made it this way? And, what role has

racism in particular played in this process? Answering these questions, however, has forced the acceptance of a narrow range of choices that overlooks the commonalities between the assimilationist and retentionist positions. One of these similarities is that both sides more often than not have viewed race and ethnicity as artifacts of culture, as something to possess or of which to be dispossessed. As a result, they have approached identity as a thing to be discovered and measured rather than as a jumble of social texts to be sorted out and interpreted.[8] With respect to a similar problem in Chicano historiography, George J. Sánchez maintains that the emphasis on "bi-polar models that have stressed either cultural continuity [retentionists] or gradual acculturation [assimilationists] has short-circuited a full exploration of the complex process of cultural adaptation." In his study of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, Sánchez contends that group identity was actually "betwixt and between" the poles of assimilation and retention; it was fluid, ambiguous, and contingent upon historical experience.[9]

In the past twenty years, students of American race and ethnicity have jettisoned the notion of assimilation, signaling the ultimate triumph of retentionism. But in so doing, a new debate has arisen within the retentionist camp. Writings from literary criticism, cultural studies, race theory, and sociology have changed the question from *whether* ethnic and racial identities are desirable to *how* they have been constructed. "Constructionists" see identity not as an inherent, social fact but as a transitive action predicated on attaining and maintaining authority.[10] To Michael Omi and Howard Winant, for example, race is a dialectic of contested racial meanings in which options compete for authenticity within a broad range of political struggles and everyday situations. By enacting "racism" in explicit and implicit ways, dominating groups have set the stage for those they have subordinated to advance their cause by reinterpreting racist discourse—thereby rearticulating it into an empowering racial identity.[11]

Omi and Winant ground their definition of racial rearticulation in the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. They argue that the "greatest triumph" of civil rights leaders was not their legislative victories. Rather, it was the ability to infuse black folk culture with the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and other students of colonial resistance: in other words, the creation of a "home-grown liberation theology." It was only by tapping into the cultural and religious language of black life that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his colleagues were able to mobilize the black masses to support something entirely new to them and to Ameri-

can history: a direct, sustained, and collective confrontation with racist policies and practices. The Civil Rights Movement, Omi and Winant conclude, rearticulated black identity by offering its "adherents a different view of themselves and their world; different, that is, from the worldview and self-concepts offered by the established social order." [12]

The significance of racial rearticulation as conceptual device is its ability to explain more than the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. If the movement's direct action politics were new, its transformation of racist discourse into grounds for black dignity and empowerment were, as Lawrence W. Levine explained more than two decades ago, part of a cultural lineage rooted in slavery. Levine reveals that slave work songs and spirituals, folktales, and understanding of Christianity were each reformulated from the master culture to sustain the slaves' self-esteem and nourish their souls.[13] In a more recent analysis, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham also asserts that blacks and whites have interpreted race differently, evidencing a "double-voiced discourse" that has long served the "voice of black oppression and the voice of black liberation." [14] Yet she complicates the understanding of racial rearticulation by asserting that the voice of black liberation has concealed other voices within black America. She maintains that race is not simply a passive result of social pathologies and jaundiced assumptions about physical and cultural difference. Rather it is a vibrant and constantly changing creature that "impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted" by subsuming "other sets of social relations, namely, gender and class." What makes race even more difficult to apprehend, Higginbotham adds, is that it "blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops." [15] In other words, racial rhetoric contains hidden assumptions that establish gender and class hierarchies within, as well as outside, the black community.

This book addresses the problem of racial rearticulation for Japanese Americans as a response to pressures from white America and as a strategy for engineering consent within the ethnic community. In important ways, the formation of ethnic identity within the Los Angeles community was a process of turning the dominant language of race against itself. The overwhelming majority of Japanese Americans did not, as proponents of ethnic retention would have us believe, reject American institutions and ideals of democracy, patriotism, economic opportunity, and cultural adaptation. But this did not mean, as assimilationists would be quick to assert, that Japanese Americans got beyond race by forging color-blind affinities and perceptions of social reality. The main

challenge to anti-Japanese sentiments and practices was rooted in neither the preservation nor the abandonment of ethnic traditions. It was Japanese Americans' fighting back by rewiring racism to serve their own collective needs and interests. Ethnic traditions, like those practiced during Nisei Week, may have been both preserved and abandoned, but more often they were rearticulated on the basis of perceived opportunities to gain broad-based acceptance, legitimacy, and class status—an American dream for any subjugated minority.

But racial rearticulation had boundaries of its own. In defining their identity, most Japanese Americans were constrained by their own desire to succeed in American society. Like folk heroes in black America, they sought to defeat white society on its own terms and by its own rules. They would triumph, as Levine says of legendary railroad worker John Henry and prizefighter Joe Louis, "not by breaking laws of the larger society but by smashing its expectations and stereotypes, by insisting that their lives transcend the traditional models and roles established for them and their people by the white majority." [16] For Japanese Americans this meant giving credence to social distinctions and hierarchies at the core of American culture: Men and masculinity were privileged over women and femininity; middle-class lifestyles and sensibilities were valued over those of the subordinate classes; and a Whiggish faith in the ultimate fairness of American government subsumed more critical and pessimistic concerns about state authority. Such preferences, of course, were not difficult for many Japanese Americans to accept, given the patriarchal and caste structures they had known in Japan. But once in the United States, this cultural inheritance fused with the new social circumstances to become distinctly Japanese American.

The imperative of group mobility also gave rise to a metalanguage of Japanese American identity that opposed external impositions of race by imposing a fictive sense of group solidarity within the ethnic community. The challenge for successive incarnations of the Japanese American leadership was to persuade, prod, or cajole their constituents to accept (or at least not to openly contradict) its particular version of collective identity. This *ethnic orthodoxy* concealed the opinions and experiences of those who did not (or could not) conform to the leadership's sanguine image of Japanese Americans. And more than this, they disciplined, punished, and stigmatized a shifting set of social groups (including generations, women, workers, radicals, and juvenile delinquents) whose very existence jeopardized group orthodoxy. Highlighting these sorts of *internal others* became an indispensable mechanism for teaching by example.

To point out the disobedient and disorderly was to underscore the cultural and political orientations befitting "proper" Japanese Americans.

But these internal others, too, were more than victims. They opposed ethnic orthodoxies, especially during times of severe crisis, such as the internment, through acts of criticism, aversion, disorder, and protest. And so it was that at the Manzanar, California, internment camp, where a large part of the Los Angeles Japanese American community was held, the ethnic leadership was unable, even with government coercion, to persuade the majority of their fellow internees to surrender their ethnic affiliations. In this sense, the rearticulation of Japanese American identity was a struggle not only for the ethnic group's self-determination but also for who within the group would determine the ethnic self.

The relationship between the community's leadership and its internal others was typically seen as a conflict between generations (such as Issei versus Nisei), but it was also rooted in a deep, historically precedented class cleavage within the ethnic community. By class, I do not mean a relationship to the means of production, for in this sense the overwhelming majority of Japanese Americans have belonged to the same class. I refer instead to different degrees of what Pierre Bourdieu calls economic and cultural capital (i.e., one's income, educational level, occupational prestige, family pedigree, aesthetic competence, moral authority, and gender consciousness). Social identities, according to Bourdieu, are rooted in the unconscious habits of mind and behavior (or *habitus*) that emerge with a given combination of economic and cultural capital.[17] Throughout the Japanese American experience, it was common for ethnic leaders, who possessed the highest forms of economic and cultural capital, to embrace a flexible identity that transcended racial and ethnic boundaries. On the other hand, those with the lowest degrees of economic and cultural capital were more likely to be viewed as internal others at odds with the leadership's ethnic prescriptions.

For example, *Meiji* intellectuals, Japan's great advocates of immigration to the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, blamed the formation of anti-Japanese laws and immigration restrictions on the "backwardness" and parochialism of Japanese immigrants, who descended largely from the farming classes. As community leaders, the Meiji championed a sense of "cosmopolitanism" that upheld Western society as the highest standard of civilization and thus urged Japanese immigrants to adapt felicitously to American values, norms, and institutions. As a ruling orthodoxy, cosmopolitanism was an inherently gendered construct. It emphasized the importance of the public sphere

as the crucial site where different races (and nations) engaged in a masculine struggle for power, resources, and respect. On the contrary, the ethnic community, given its perceived inferiority to white America, was seen as a feminine space in need of protection and governance. And so cosmopolitanism rested on a fictive opposition between courageous, intelligent, and cultured ethnic leaders and the childlike, clannish, and emotionally driven masses of Japanese Americans.

This class conflict among Japanese Americans should not be surprising; Harry H. L. Kitano, in an influential study of Japanese American identity, identified significant economic strata within the group. Based on sociologist Milton M. Gordon's conclusions about the primacy of class divisions within American ethnic groups, Kitano argued that Japanese Americans identified most closely with ethnic kin who shared their class and generational status. Hence a wealthy Nisei's first allegiance would be to other wealthy Nisei, and only secondarily to poorer Nisei, wealthy Issei, and other members of the ethnic group. Such class factions are also highlighted in more recent work in the social sciences. William Julius Wilson, for example, analyzes the economic and political forces after World War II that strained and severed ties between middle-class and working-class black Americans. And Peter Kwong points to a similar polarization occurring between Chinese Americans as a result of post-1965 immigration policies that attracted both highly skilled professionals and unskilled service and industrial workers.[18]

Still, despite the significance of class (and generational and gender) divisions, Japanese Americans retained a strong cohesiveness. This is the main question about Japanese American identity: How has the ethnic group maintained a sense of commonality given its internal diversity and unequal distribution of power? The notion of racial rearticulation suggests that Japanese Americans developed a sense of identity out of duress, having come together, despite their differences, for the greater purpose of fighting outside racial pressures. But understanding the racial stakes of group ties does not explain how Japanese Americans have come to recognize ethnic bonds. How did they know what it meant to be Japanese American as opposed to another ethnic group? Where were these group boundaries learned?

The burden of my argument is to show that the Nisei Week festival was a critical event at which Japanese American identity was promoted and enacted. In the past two decades, a growing number of historians have come to recognize that group identities are not the spontaneous products of social conditions (structures) but are mediated through the

repetition of cultural experiences and practices. Eric Hobsbawn calls these mediations "invented traditions" since they fabricate a sense of group norms and values by disguising them as historical, primordial truths.[19] In this sense, festivals are among the most effective and universal mechanisms for inculcating fictive identities. Anthropologist and folklorists have long known that festivals are more than a mere moment of fun and celebration and more than a temporary escape from everyday life. "They are occasions," John J. MacAloon explains, "in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others."[20]

The historical study of festivals is predicated on this broad conception of such events as producers of social change and continuity. Mona Ozouf has shown that celebrations during the French Revolution instilled cultural orientations that were instrumental to the new regime. Takashi Fujitani maintains that Japan's modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was indebted to invented celebrations of the nation's emperor, while John Bodnar, in focusing on the festivals of American immigrant ethnics during the era of heightened nativism and xenophobia, also sees celebrations as a means of transforming local identities into a national consciousness. Robert Anthony Orsi focuses on the significance of ethnic festivals within the same period. His examination of an Italian American celebration reveals the evolution of an ethnic community as it comes to terms with rapidly changing gender roles, generational orientations, and religious perspectives and rituals.[21] It is within this body of work that I have come to investigate the Nisei Week festival. What studies there are about Japanese American festivals see the events as evincing a decline in authentic Japanese traditions or look at them for insight into contemporary social issues. There has never been an examination of Nisei Week that seeks to understand its historical significance for Japanese Americans and American immigration, ethnicity, and race relations.

The narrative of Nisei Week in this book reveals the articulation and rearticulation of Japanese American identity across six historical and social contexts. Chapter 1 traces the origins of Nisei Week in the Great Depression and within mounting tensions between the United States and Japan in the early 1930s. To bridge this international divide, the Los Angeles chapter of the JACL cooperated with the Issei leadership in sponsoring and planning Nisei Week. How these JACLers sought to use the festival to stimulate the depression-weary ethnic enclave is the subject of chapter 2. To drum up business, the Nisei were told that buying in Little

Tokyo was a litmus test of an authentic Japanese American, while, at the same time, whites were informed that shopping in the ethnic enclave offered them a true-to-life Japanese adventure. Yet outsiders were assured that underneath the exotic image of Japanese Americans was a safe community committed to the nation and its moral and cultural norms. As relations between the United States and Japan collapsed in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the connection of Nisei identity to ethnic consumption (through the medium of "biculturalism") was abandoned in an attempt to prevent the second generation from appearing anything less than 100 percent American.

In the absence of Nisei Week and other ethnic traditions during World War II, the enactment of Japanese American identity relied heavily upon the use of force and naked aggression. Chapter 3 follows many of Nisei Week's JACL leaders to Manzanar, where, with government backing, they championed a strong commitment to Americanization. Confronted with intense, and at times violent, resistance from their fellow internees, most of the leading JACLers left Manzanar as soon as they could and resettled away from the West Coast. The vast majority of the ethnic community, however, returned to Los Angeles and salvaged what they could of the ethnic enclave.

Chapter 4 examines the revival of Nisei Week within the re-creation of southern California Japanese America. With the removal of racist restrictions to employment within a decade of being released from the internment camps, Japanese Americans were much less constrained from pursuing social, economic, and educational opportunities in mainstream society. Yet how far to pursue integration was an open question. The principal division was between hard-line integrationists, typically JACLers who opposed any sort of ethnic community or mandatory solidarity, and most Japanese Americans, who were committed to a less radical integrationism that encouraged the voluntary retention of ethnic identity and affiliation.

By the late 1960s, America's involvement in Vietnam and the heightening criminalization of blacks generated a new tension among Japanese Americans that would explode at Nisei Week. Chapter 5 addresses the rise of a new generation of Japanese American intellectuals and activists who challenged the ideal of integration with a new, radical version of cosmopolitanism. These student activists, many of whom participated in a social movement among Asian Americans, clashed with the Nisei "old guard," but the two sides eventually managed to come together in their attempts to resuscitate the ethnic community. In the 1970s and 1980s,

Nisei Week rearticulated the radicalism of the Asian American movement in crafting a notion of identity politics that eschewed its utopian vision yet appropriated its more pragmatic calls for ethnic pride, political assertiveness, charitable mutual aid, and liberalization of women's roles.

Finally, the tremendous expansion of Japan's economy set the stage for a new conflict within Little Tokyo. Chapter 6 examines the division between a diverse group of Japanese Americans and multinational corporations from Japan. The influence of these corporations grew in the 1960s as the city of Los Angeles used the redevelopment of Little Tokyo to attract Japanese capital and tourism to southern California. By the 1980s, these corporate interests sought to change Nisei Week's name to "Japanese festival." The proposition galvanized a cross section of Japanese Americans (Nisei, Issei, conservatives, and radicals) to defend the festival's original name and to resist, as one Nisei put it, the "Jap invasion" in Little Tokyo.

In this way, the Nisei Week festival embodied the themes and identities of three large historical periods, characterized by the prewar ethnic enclave, the Manzanar internment camp, and postwar communities of professional, radical, and international identities. The festival was established to bolster Little Tokyo businesses and protect them from the goals of the anti-Japanese movement. During World War II, the festival's leadership became the internee leaders at Manzanar, and after the war, the festival symbolized the social mobility and increasing political power of Japanese Americans. In the 1970s, it was a repeated site of protest by student activists and, through this and the next decade, became increasingly Japanized, reflecting the growing amount of funds it received from Japanese multinational corporations. This trajectory of Nisei Week, as the following narrative will reveal, is, to a great extent, the trajectory of urban Japanese American history.