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The “New” Second Generation of Japanese Americans
Defining Identity in the South Bay of Los Angeles County

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

Kelli Sakaguchi

2026

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The "New" Second Generation of Japanese Americans
Defining Identity in the South Bay of Los Angeles County

by

Kelli Sakaguchi

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2026
Professor Valerie J. Matsumoto, Chair

A new second generation of Japanese Americans is gaining the attention of the Japanese American community as they are seen as the future of the community, yet remain understudied. This thesis defines this new generation as shin-Nisei or the U.S.-born children of at least one post-World War II Japanese immigrant. Through in-depth interviews, this thesis examines the identity formation of six shin-Nisei individuals who were raised or currently live in the South Bay of Los Angeles County in California. Drawing on literature about the belonging, ethnicity, and identity of second-generation Asian Americans and others in the United States and abroad, I contextualize their narratives and explore how their identities have been constructed over time. I use the concept of place to highlight the South Bay as significant to the construction of the shin-Nisei's identity. This thesis traces the history of the local Japanese American community in the region as well as the arrival of multinational Japanese corporations, followed by contemporary Japanese immigration to the South Bay. The shin-Nisei negotiate their identities as they move

through the South Bay and beyond by maintaining ties to ethnic heritage, constructing American identities, and redefining what it means to be Japanese American.

The thesis of Kelli Sakaguchi is approved.

Jennifer J. Chun

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University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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Introduction

> I identify as a Japanese American. I think I'm not Japanese, nor am I really- I'm definitely not Japanese, even though I have a Japanese- culturally, I don't think I'm Japanese… I can tell. I know that I'm very different.
> The beauty of America is that it's very- it's a broad umbrella, right? So I'm a Japanese American. But I do think I'm an American first then Japanese.[1]

This statement conveys how Roger, who grew up as the son of Japanese immigrants in the South Bay region of Los Angeles County in California, narrates his identity *now.* Had I interviewed him when he was younger during elementary or middle school, his answer would have been different. Roger attributes this shift in his identity largely to language fluency. His first language was Japanese, and he recalled struggling to speak English until fourth grade: "I don't really remember when I (snaps fingers) English kicked in for me, but I still remember [in] second grade, I was struggling."[2] Once English "kicked in," he felt that he began to "fit in" among his peers, such as his classmates at school and his soccer teammates. In doing so, he expanded his social circles and embraced the multicultural environment of the South Bay.

Over the years, various internal and external influences and resources have shaped the construction of Roger's identity and continue to do so.[3] As he and other shin-Nisei move through the different life stages, both in the South Bay and elsewhere, they imbue their past, present, and future experiences with new meanings.[4] The shin-Nisei thus are undergoing continuous processes of identity formation, impacted by their physical location and social structures and relations. In the South Bay, the shin-Nisei live alongside a historic Japanese American

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[1] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[2] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[3] Christopher Grey and Michelle O'Toole, "The Placing of Identity and the Identification of Place," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 29(2) (2020): 208.

[4] Grey and O'Toole, "The Placing of Identity and the Identification of Place," 209.

community, Japanese corporate structures, and racial/ethnic diversity, all of which combine to shape their unique sense of identity over time.

As expressed by Roger, a new second generation is developing a sense of identity that reflects a changing Japanese American (JA) community and definitions of group identity. This study examines the shin-Nisei ("new second generation") and their narrative experiences to discuss their identity formation with a focus on their ties to ethnic heritage, sense of belonging in the United States, and position in the Japanese American community. In this study, shin-Nisei refers to the U.S.-born children of at least one post-World War II Japanese immigrant. While this study uses shin-Nisei as a shorthand for identifying the children of postwar Japanese immigrants and to differentiate them from the Nisei of an earlier wave of immigration, the participants in this study do not identify with or use the term. Instead, the shin-Nisei refer to themselves as simply Japanese American without any mention of generational status.

In contrast, the Japanese American community has long used generational status as a marker of belonging because of its ties to historical experience, such as prewar immigration, World War II incarceration, postwar relocation, and redress.[5] This research defines historic/multigenerational Japanese Americans as born in the United States with ties reaching back at least three generations to pre-World War II Japanese immigration. The Japanese immigrants who arrived in the United States during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century are called the "Issei," or the first generation. Their children are known as the second generation, the "Nisei." Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, in 1942, the Issei and Nisei on the West Coast were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in incarceration camps until the

[5] Lorine E. Saito, "The Complexity of Generational Status and Ethnic Identity of Japanese Americans," *The Family Journal* 29(2) (2021): 215.

end of the war in 1945. The third generation, referred to as "Sansei," were mostly born postwar and associated with the Asian American Movement and Third World Strikes of the late 1960s and 1970s. Today, the descendants of the initial wave of Japanese immigrants are in their fourth generation ("Yonsei"), fifth generation ("Gosei"), and even sixth generation. However, it is important to remember that for multigenerational Japanese Americans, generational labels remain highly fluid, shifting as they move through different places and life stages.

To distinguish the postwar wave of Japanese immigrants from the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese diaspora, contemporary Japanese immigrants and their descendants have been designated by *shin,* meaning "new" in Japanese. These immigrants are thus called the shin-Issei, or "new" first-generation, and their children are the shin-Nisei, the "new" second-generation. The interviews I conducted with six shin-Nisei individuals who were born and raised in, or currently living in, the South Bay of southern California reveal emerging trends in a growing and understudied population: the shin-Nisei have a strong American identification, little to no interaction with the historic Japanese American community and its social structures, and a diluted perception of the impact of prewar and World War II experiences on the Japanese American community. These trends shaped my study to focus on their identity formations, and the impact of both their social circles and the American mainstream on that process, compared to multigenerational Japanese Americans.

I found that the shin-Nisei tend to distance themselves from the Japanese from Japan, citing recognized differences in language skills and understandings of race as they live alongside Japanese businessmen and their children. As a result, the shin-Nisei identify as Japanese *American.* This does not mean that they are involved in the formal Japanese American community and its social structures, leading to limited interactions with this community.

Therefore, they narrate their Japanese American identity differently than multigenerational Japanese Americans. However, the shin-Nisei still benefit from the strong presence of Japanese corporations and the historic Japanese American community, both of which have been important in the establishment of ethnic resources such as grocery stores and churches in the South Bay. Living in this region, the shin-Nisei are exposed to a diverse multicultural environment that has allowed them to embrace their own unique identities.

Methodology

I conducted semi-structured interviews with six shin-Nisei individuals who are the child of at least one Japanese immigrant. To meet the criteria for the sample, the shin-Nisei had to be born in Southern California and raised in or currently living in the South Bay. Between July and September 2025 on Zoom and in-person, I interviewed four shin-Nisei of full Japanese descent whom I contacted through personal connections and two multiracial shin-Nisei contacted through the Gardena Valley Japanese Cultural Institute (GVJCI). I used pseudonyms for all the interviewees to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

This study centered on the shin-Nisei's personal narratives as the primary source of data on their identity formation because their recollections of experiences and events mark their importance to the shin-Nisei.[6] By providing them the opportunity to talk about their experiences in semi-structured interviews, this study aimed to show how the shin-Nisei made sense of their life experiences and constructed their identity.[7] I used qualitative analysis to analyze the six interviews and organized their responses into five major themes as described below.

[6] Katherine Nelson, "Self and Social Functions: Individual Autobiographical Memory and Collective Narrative," *Memory* 11(2) (2003): 129.

[7] Hannah H. Kim and Deborah L. Vietze, "Using Narrative Inquiry for Exploring Biculturalism and Resilience in Korean American Young Adults in New York City," *American Journal of Qualitative Research* 7(1) (2023): 3-4.

Outline of the Study

The first chapter ("Living in the South Bay Today") presents the world of the South Bay from the shin-Nisei's perspective, centering their memories of living there. Drawing on their stories, this section highlights their multicultural upbringing, diverse social circles, and attitudes towards Japan and Japanese Americans. The second chapter ("Settling in the South Bay") traces the history of Japanese and Japanese Americans in the South Bay from the development of a Japanese American community hub through pre-World War II agriculture to post-World War II rebuilding, to the impact of Japanese corporate establishment in contemporary times. It draws on Tritia Toyota's work on the shin-Issei to discuss factors that contributed to their immigration to the United States and settlement in the South Bay. The third chapter ("Maintaining Ties to Ethnic Heritage") discusses how the shin-Nisei develop their sense of ethnic identity through language, ethnic church, and social circles, as well as the social acceptance of Japanese and other Asian cultures by the mainstream. The presence of Japanese corporations in the South Bay and the currently positive perception of Japanese identity and culture make the shin-Nisei's ties to ethnic heritage different from those of multigenerational Japanese Americans and can reveal dynamics of race and class in Japan and among Japanese Americans. The fourth chapter ("Identifying as American") focuses on the shin-Nisei's perception of American identity, including mainstream and gendered stereotypes, and regional impacts. Their social and regional context, such as growing up in the multicultural South Bay, has had a significant impact on the construction of their American identities. The fifth chapter ("Redefining Japanese American Identity") contrasts the importance of generation to multigenerational Japanese American identity with the shin-Nisei's lack of identification with generational labels and markers, which have led to different definitions of what it means to be Japanese American.

Despite their growing numbers, the shin-Nisei have been largely left out of the literature on Japanese Americans, reflecting the lack of research on them and, until recently, their parents, the shin-Issei. I found only two studies that discuss the shin-Nisei. In her 2012 MA thesis, "Acts of Being and Belonging: Shin-Issei Transnational Identity Negotiations," Eri Kameyama explored the ethnic identity formation of shin-Issei in Southern California and analyzed their sense of racial, social, and legal belonging.[8] Based on that work, her short essay "Shin-Issei/Shin-Nisei Identity," which appeared in *Japanese Americans: A History and Culture of a People* (2018), highlighted the importance of local regions to the identity formation of the shin-Issei and shin-Nisei. "Particularly in California," Kameyama wrote, "a majority of the Shin-Issei and Shin-Nisei are bilingual and bicultural because of the availability of transnational resources such as language institutions and cultural products, ranging from Japanese television to hair and beauty products."[9] Takeyuki Tsuda devoted a chapter of his book *Japanese American Ethnicity: In Search of Heritage and Homeland Across Generations* (2016) to the thirteen shin-Nisei he interviewed and focused on their bicultural and transnational lives: "[The shin-Nisei] have retained their Japanese cultural heritage to a much greater extent, their ethnicity and identities are bicultural and they are transnationally engaged with their ethnic homeland."[10] The shin-Nisei I interviewed, however, pointed me in new directions, which expanded upon the influence of social relationships, regional environment, and internal community divisions on their sense of ethnic identity.

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[8] Eri Kameyama, "Acts of Being and Belonging: Shin-Issei Transnational Identity Negotiations," (MA Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2012). https://escholarship.org/content/qt05v6t6rn/qt05v6t6rn.pdf?v=lg.

[9] Eri Kameyama, "Shin-Issei/Shin-Nisei," in *Japanese Americans: The History and Culture of a People,* ed. Jonathan H.X. Lee. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2018), 398.

[10] Takeyuki Tsuda, "The Postwar Nisei: Biculturalism and Transnational Identities," in *Japanese American Ethnicity: In Search of Heritage and Homeland Across Generations.* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 81.

As a result, I pieced together comparative research on issues such as belonging, ethnicity, and identity in the United States and abroad and drew on the experiences of other second-generation Asian Americans in the 21st century to contextualize the narratives of the shin-Nisei I interviewed. For example, I discussed ethnic identity for multiracial individuals in Japan and shin-Nisei in the United States using studies by Sara Oikawa and Tomoko Yoshida, and Rebecca Chiyoko King. I also applied Kristina Bakkær Simonsen's theory of boundary perceptions to the mainstream stereotypes about Asian American women discussed in Lydia HaRim Ahn et al.'s work to understand how the shin-Nisei women narrate their American identities. I utilized studies on the role of food, language, and regional influences to explore how the shin-Nisei define and construct their identities. Tat Shum and Terence Chun's work on West Africans in Hong Kong, for example, highlighted the role of ethnic cuisine in promoting the acceptance of diaspora populations in the mainstream. This, in addition to Meredith Oda's work on the popularization of Japanese cuisine, contextualized the role food plays in maintaining the shin-Nisei's ties to ethnic heritage.

Tritia Toyota's milestone book *Intimate Strangers: Shin Issei Women and Contemporary Japanese American Community, 1980-2020* (Temple University Press, 2023) breaks ground in the research gap on postwar Japanese immigrants. In her interviews with forty-five shin-Issei women in Southern California, they revealed their immigration journeys, tracing their paths from precarious economic status in Japan to settlement in the United States, where they faced limited labor markets and social marginalization. Her research describes the language schools and multinational corporations, for example, that have shaped these women's relationships with each other, their families, and the local Japanese American communities, and establishes the unique social environment of Southern California. Her work has been crucial to my presentation of the

historical background of the shin-Nisei's parents, as well as the context in which the shin-Nisei were raised.

I am a Yonsei, a fourth-generation Japanese American who grew up in Torrance, California with a strong Japanese American community, including other Yonsei and shin-Nisei. My interactions with the shin-Nisei have sparked my interest in their experiences and perspectives. Growing up, I remember listening to my shin-Nisei friends complain about going to Japanese language school on Saturday and hearing them speak to their parents in Japanese. Sometimes, they would speak rapid-fire Japanese to me, too, to which I often tilted my head and replied, "Huh?" It was a stark contrast from my Yonsei friends, who would never even think of speaking to me in Japanese. Over the years, I picked up on more differences between my shin-Nisei friends and me, such as their annual trips to Japan, neatly crafted bento lunches, and social circles outside of school.[11] These observations stimulated my interest in exploring how they construct their identities and what being Japanese American means to them. By centering their stories, this study can offer insight into how the shin-Nisei navigate their identities in the 21st century.

To this day, my Sansei father will often say to me, "You're so lucky you get to grow up in the South Bay." This "luck" is the multiple ethnic resources available to me in the South Bay, from the wide range of Japanese restaurants to the presence of local Japanese American organizations, such as the basketball leagues. It is a stark contrast to his upbringing in Sun Valley in the San Fernando Valley region, where he and his family were the only Japanese Americans in his neighborhood and at school. While I had access to a local Japanese American Girl Scouts

[11] "Bento" refers to a Japanese-style (home-made) lunch, usually including rice and packed into a segmented box with different foods placed in each section.

troop, which was a 20-minute drive on surface streets, my father traveled for an hour-and-a-half or more by bus from his home in Sun Valley to Little Tokyo in downtown Los Angeles to attend his Japanese American Boy Scouts meetings. As I spent my weekends playing in the JA basketball leagues, attending Japanese language school, and frequenting my local ethnic grocery stores, I grew up immersed in the strong Japanese and Japanese American influences of the South Bay, whether I realized it or not. With my father's words and Kameyama's quote about regional impact in mind, I decided to focus on shin-Nisei in the South Bay.

This study presents the South Bay as a "place," or a location with physical and symbolic qualities that are constructed and experienced through the lens of gender, ethnicity, and migrant status.[12] The shin-Nisei in the South Bay are living amid continuous relational processes, wherein the narration of one's identity shifts according to their social relation to others, which is impacted by location.[13] Over time, "place itself is socially constructed so as to acquire a range of social meanings which interact in a recursive relationship with identity."[14] The shin-Nisei in this study reveal how the South Bay has had significant influence on the construction and maintenance of their identity.[15]

In the sample for this study, Roger and Ken are men, while Jane, Ruth, Clare, and Anne are women. Except for Anne (who is in her early 40s), all the participants are in their 20s. Below are more detailed profiles for each interviewee.

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[12] Deborah Phillips and David Robinson, "Reflections on Migration, Community, and Place," *Population, Space, and Place* 21 (2015): 410.

[13] Anna Bohman, Clifton Evers, and Eva Lövbrand, "More than One Story: Remaking Community and Place in Sweden's Transition to a Fossil Free Society," *Local Environment* 29(4) (2024): 436.

[14] Grey and O'Toole, "The Placing of Identity and the Identification of Place," 206.

[15] Grey and O'Toole, "The Placing of Identity and the Identification of Place," 214.

Roger

Roger was born in Sherman Oaks, California, and moved with his parents and older brother to the Torrance/Carson area as a one-year-old to be closer to his mother's work at a Japanese language school. His father, an architect, immigrated for more creative freedom. As a rare only child, his mother immigrated to escape the attention of her parents. His parents met in the United States, married, and are green card holders. Roger considers himself bilingual since he grew up speaking Japanese with his parents, but lacking in reading and writing Japanese, wishing he had studied harder when he was younger. Almost every summer until about middle school, he traveled with his mother and older brother to Japan, where he attended school and visited with family. Soccer stopped his annual trips to Japan, as well as his attendance in Japanese language school in the United States. He grew up in multicultural neighborhoods around Black, Filipino, and Mexican families, and met other shin-Nisei through his parents' relationships. He now lives on the East Coast attending graduate school for environmental science.

Ken

Ken was born and raised in Torrance with an older brother. His parents had met and married while living in the same apartment complex in Gardena. His father naturalized as an U.S. citizen fifteen years ago and Ken stated that he is somewhat confident that his mother is on a work visa. His father worked as a car mechanic at a Japanese auto-shop, while his mother worked in Human Resources (H.R.) for Honda headquarters in Torrance, helping to transition Japanese workers into the American workspace. His mother immigrated to experience the United States, initially moving to Kansas before settling in Southern California. His father, on the other hand, immigrated to work as a helicopter pilot out of Long Beach Airport. When Ken traveled to

Japan around the holidays, he visited family in his mother's or father's hometown, Ehime and Miyazaki, respectively. His most recent visit to Japan was for his cousin's wedding, where he was able to do more "tourist" things, like visit Kyoto and eat Kobe steak, for the first time.[16] Like Roger, Ken also played soccer mainly with Mexican Americans and met other shin-Nisei through his parents' relationships. Soccer ended his trips to Japan as well as attendance in Japanese language school. He knows enough Japanese to be considered bilingual, since he grew up speaking it with his parents, but acknowledges his patchwork knowledge of reading and writing. He currently works as a healthcare administrator in Northern California and will be returning to Southern California to earn his MS degree in Healthcare Administration.

Jane

Jane was born in Los Angeles and grew up in the Gardena/Harbor City area. Her mother, from Okinawa, and her father, from Osaka, met at a hotel in the United States, where her mother was then working as part of her "hippie-trip."[17] Her mother, who worked as a nurse in Japan, is now a self-employed caretaker. Both are green card holders. While Jane grew up speaking Japanese with her parents and attended Japanese language school, she stated that since she no longer lives with her mother, she rarely speaks Japanese. During childhood, she visited Japan twice, both times to see family. During her visit to Osaka, she attended school there. Growing up, many of her friends were Asian American and she swam competitively for Swim Torrance. Jane moved to Orange County to attend a private high school and expressed a strong dislike for "the vibes" there.[18] She currently lives in Gardena and works in downtown Los Angeles as a stenographer.

[16] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[17] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

[18] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

Ruth

Ruth was born in Torrance and grew up in Gardena. Her mother, who immigrated to the United States as a child, is an American citizen. Her maternal grandfather moved to the South Bay to help establish a Christian church catering to the Japanese-speaking population. Ruth grew up attending the church. Her mother now works at All Nippon Airways (ANA), which has an office in Torrance. Her father is from Tottori and a green card holder. Ruth grew up around shin-Nisei and Asian Americans, and travels to Japan at least once a year, usually to visit family and friends. As a child, she attended school in Japan. She also attended Japanese language school in the South Bay for about four years and maintains her language skills through work. She moved to Houston, Texas for two months to complete her flight attendant training and now works for United Airlines based in San Francisco.

Clare

Clare was born in the San Fernando Valley, moved to the West Side of Los Angeles, then moved to Connecticut with her mother in eighth grade. Because of these moves, she had a changing group of friends, and often, was the only Japanese American. After living on the East Coast for five years, she returned to Southern California and settled in the South Bay where her father chose to live because of the large Japanese population. Her father had immigrated from Chiba to pursue photography, while her mother is a white American. Her parents met at a Japanese piano bar in New York and divorced when Clare was about 13 years old. Although she can understand Japanese, her father did not speak to her in Japanese growing up and she did not continue attending Japanese language school so her speaking skills are limited. She traveled to Japan two to four times during the summer as a child. Many of her friends now are

multigenerational Japanese Americans. She works for a Japanese American legislator in California and is involved with the Japanese American community through her work.

Anne

Anne was born in the San Fernando Valley and grew up in North Redondo Beach with white people and other multiracial shin-Nisei. Her mother is from Hokkaido and met her white American father during his deployment in Japan during the Vietnam War. They chose to settle in the South Bay to ease the social stigma as a multiracial couple and for her mother's convenience because of her limited English. Her parents divorced when she was in fourth grade. Growing up, Anne played soccer and was part of the Japanese-speaking congregation of various Christian churches. She made frequent trips to Gardena with her mother and younger brother. She attended Japanese language school and stated that her knowledge of Japanese is shaped by conversations with her mother about housework, in addition to conversations at work surrounding social services. After attending college on the East Coast, she returned to the South Bay. Growing up, she travelled to Japan every five years to visit family. She now lives in the South Bay with her Japanese American husband and children and works for the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) in social services. Since she is older than the other participants by about two decades, Anne's interview sheds light on the environment of the South Bay before the other five interviewees were born and shows changes over the years. She observes current Japanese American interactions with the shin-Nisei as someone involved in the community as an adult through her work.

Chapter 1: Living in the South Bay Today

Located in the southwestern region of the Greater Los Angeles County, the South Bay spans seventeen square miles with a current population of 139,333 people.[19] The region includes parts of Los Angeles County, unincorporated areas, and cities such as Torrance, Gardena, and Palos Verdes. Fourteen percent of this population is Asian, representing a wide range of ethnic groups, with those of Japanese and Filipino descent making up the largest groups, while 61% are white, 14% are Hispanic, and 2% are Black.[20] There, the shin-Nisei are exposed to strong co-ethnic, mainstream, and multicultural influences and social circles that impact their identity formation. Stuart Hall argues that ethnic identities developed in diaspora create a "new ethnicity," along with a hybrid culture, distinct from its "roots" because the ethnicity is operating in a different context.[21] In the case of this study, the shin-Nisei are developing their sense of ethnic identity in the South Bay, and this section presents the region from their perspective, drawing on their memories and experiences to showcase the roots of their identity.

Anne described the South Bay as having "everything you need as a Japanese American or Japanese speaker."[22] She recalled that even though she lived in North Redondo, every weekend, her mother took her and her brother to Gardena. She explained,

> And even though we lived in North Redondo, we were in- basically, we were in Gardena every weekend for J-school for first to third grade, and then, our doctor was a Japanese-speaking pediatrician. Our dentist was a Japanese-speaking

[19] U.S. Census Bureau (2024). *American Community Survey 5-year estimates.* Retrieved from *Census Reporter Profile page for South Bay Cities CCD, Los Angeles County, CA*. http://censusreporter.org/profiles/06000US0603793100-south-bay-cities-ccd-los-angeles-county-ca/.

[20] U.S. Census Bureau (2024). *American Community Survey 5-year estimates.* Retrieved from *Census Reporter Profile page for South Bay Cities CCD, Los Angeles County, CA*; U.S. Census Bureau. 2024: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Available via American FactFinder. https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2024.B02018?t=Race+and+Ethnicity&g=060XX00US0603793100,0603793380.

[21] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference,* ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Duke University Press, 2021): 253-254.

[22] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

> dentist. We were- at that time, it was New Meiji Market. All the time, went to the Gardena Library, so we were in Gardena, kind of all the time. And… Torrance, too.[23]

Experiences such as these reflect how the establishment of Japanese corporations has transformed the surrounding neighborhoods, imbuing them with Japanese influence.

These transformations persist today for the shin-Nisei. Clare mentioned that during her lunch breaks, she usually grabs a bite to eat at Mitsuwa, a Japanese supermarket, across from her workplace.[24] Ken added that his parents often shopped at Tokyo Central and Mitsuwa, where they could easily find the ingredients for Japanese foods such as *cha-han* or gyoza.[25] At these stores, they also found familiar brands for certain products, such as Tamaki Gold rice. However, his parents did not limit themselves to co-ethnic spaces; they also went to the Ralph's down the street from his house. The other shin-Nisei in this study echo the same, remembering their parents shopping at Trader Joe's and Grocery Outlet, too.

Growing up in the South Bay seems to have made the shin-Nisei feel comfortable surrounded by both co-ethnic and diverse influences. Anne described living in the South Bay as being a "fish in the water" where a person may not realize the impact of Japanese and Asian culture in the region until they leave it.[26] In other words, in the South Bay, the shin-Nisei live in a naturalized bicultural environment due to the presence and accessibility of Japanese capital and culture that are not readily available in places outside the South Bay. This may explain why Jane disliked the "vibes" of other regions in Southern California, such as Orange County. Jane

[23] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[24] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[25] Ken, interview with author, July 2025. "*Chan-han*" is the Japanese term for fried rice. "Gyoza" is the Japanese term for dumpling.

[26] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

explained, “And maybe it just has to do with me having grown up in the South Bay, maybe. Definitely the familiarity… both the people and the atmosphere.”[27]

However, heavy co-ethnic influence does not solely define their experiences of the South Bay. Ken mentioned Del Amo Mall, Old Torrance, and beaches such as Redondo Pier and Mickey’s Deli in Hermosa Beach as important landmarks for him in the South Bay. These places are significant to him because “I went to those beaches a lot growing up and I used to hang out a lot at the Del Amo Mall.”[28] As such, Ken tended to lean into more “American” mainstream spaces, or spaces that cater to a predominantly white population/clientele. Ruth, on the other hand, frequented Asian American-run cafes in Gardena such as Yeems Coffee, Seven Leaves, and Café Pruvia.[29] Boba shops and cafes serve as important social gathering spaces for Asian American youth, especially for those who live in the suburbs with few opportunities to socialize freely with their peers.[30] There, they could escape household pressures and consume Asian-inspired beverages, such as sea cream jasmine tea at Seven Leaves, and pastries, such as the matcha date ginger scone at Yeems Coffee, with those who shared similar tastes, creating a pan-ethnic youth culture.[31] The hangout locations of Ken and Ruth demonstrate the different spaces the shin-Nisei tend to occupy in the South Bay, from mainstream to pan-ethnic.

The attitudes towards Asian Americans in the suburbs have shifted over time, too, allowing the shin-Nisei to feel safer even in “white” neighborhoods such as Torrance or Palos

[27] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

[28] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[29] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025. Yeems Coffee is a Korean American enterprise, Seven Leaves was started by a Vietnamese American family, and Café Pruvia has Japanese American owners.

[30] Talitha Angelica Trazo, “‘Wanna Get Boba?’: The Bond Between Boba and Asian American Youth in San Jose, California” (MA Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2020), 55-56. https://escholarship.org/content/qt7d24w91f/qt7d24w91f.pdf.

[31] Trazo, “‘Wanna Get Boba?’,” 38; 30.

Verdes (PV). This can be demonstrated by shin-Nisei's interactions with the police. During the 1990s, Anne's brother drove a "Rice Rocket," the term for small, high-performance cars or motorcycles, produced by Japanese corporations, for local street racing and cruising, often by young Asian American men.[32] "Rice Rocket," whether it was used as a slur or reclaimed with pride, reflected the integration of imports into the American automotive landscape.[33] She recalled:

> …if he drove through Torrance, a police car followed him, and he said his strategy was always to pull into a gas station and pretend to be filling his tank until the… police car left, right? There's a certain element of profiling. Or… there are parts of Torrance, and PV, or even South Redondo, and North- and anywhere, where… people are uncomfortable… seeing other people who are not like them in their neighborhood, right?[34]

On the other hand, during the late 2010s, Roger recalled an instance where he was pulled over by the police. He explained,

> Yeah, I got pulled over in high school, was driving up late at night way too fast. I got pulled over, didn't get a ticket, you know? That was me and my other two Asian friends. It's definitely not the case, thirty years ago, twenty years ago… But we're not profiled the same way African Americans are… yeah, I feel like people see me as less of a threat, as a 5'7" Asian boy, you know, compared to another minority.[35]

During the post-World War II period, Japanese Americans were considered the "model minority" due to their cultural values of hard work, honesty, and clean living.[36] Through this framing, Japanese Americans appeared to gain proximity to whiteness, while distancing themselves from

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[32] Anne, interview with author, September 2025; Oliver Wang, *Cruising Through J-Town: Japanese American Car Culture in Los Angeles,* (Los Angeles: Angel City Press, 2025): 189.

[33] Wang, *Cruising Through J-Town,* 189.

[34] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[35] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[36] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 165.

the oppression and negative perceptions of Black Americans and other racial minorities, marked by economic deprivation and "degraded" morals.[37] Because of this stereotyping, Black Americans experience harsher policing than Asian Americans due to their assumed criminality. Roger majored in history and initially focused on Asian American history, before pivoting to African American history, which may explain his awareness of racial dynamics in policing.[38]

This shift in attitude towards Japanese Americans has come, in part, as a result of their rising economic position, marking their suburban status.[39] Ken, who grew up in Torrance, described his childhood:

> I grew up in a house with two loving parents. Lived in a town home- lived a comfortable life. I was able to play soccer, play club soccer, attend… private school, elementary [and] middle school. So I never really had hardships. Like *actual* hardships of not knowing if there's gonna be food on the table for it at the night, or if we paid electric bills…With all the stuff that I was able to grow up with, it also helped me excel in school 'cause didn't have to worry about anything else other than "Okay, I need to do all my tests and then play soccer in the afternoon."[40]

Roger acknowledged his privilege growing up as well, and added, "In the South Bay… in my head, at least, where I grew up, and what I experienced growing up in the South Bay, people are either Asian or Mexican, right? And then the rich kids are the white kids."[41]

Following World War II, both domestic and international developments also contributed to shifting attitudes toward Japanese Americans. The Civil Rights Movements and the Asian American Movement and the influx of Japanese war brides, along with the war brides' portrayals

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[37] Wu, *The Color of Success,* 170-173.

[38] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[39] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 20.

[40] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[41] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

in mainstream media, "provided an increasingly acceptable way to view the Japanese more sympathetically and to celebrate racial tolerance." [42] Moreover, the United States' newfound alliance with Japan during the Cold War required the American public to have a positive image of the Japanese, both abroad and at home. To facilitate this shift, the federal government framed the American-occupied Japan as becoming more open-minded.[43] Through the work of American writers and journalists in Japan, the American public gained access to the new, reconstructed Japan as they embraced the "American Way" by adopting "universal" humanistic values and economic principles.[44] For example, American newspaper articles framed Emperor Hirohito as a peaceful family man and a "good Japanese" who was forced into the war by militarists, such as Hideki Tojo, the military official who oversaw the attack on Pearl Harbor.[45] As a result, the American public began to see Japan, their people, and their cultural values in a positive light, compatible with the construction of the model minority in the United States. Such positive news reports helped to moderate anxiety over the postwar settlement of Japanese Americans and later, the *chuuzai-in* and shin-Issei, and facilitate social cohesion in the South Bay.[46]

According to a study conducted by the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) in 2017, the South Bay is home to the largest concentration of Japanese Americans, both of prewar and postwar genealogies, in the continental United States.[47] These demographics have created an environment with abundant co-ethnic influences through historic Japanese American social

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[42] Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006): 7; 50.

[43] Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally,* 294-295.

[44] Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally,* 63.

[45] Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally,* 101.

[46] Phillips and Robinson, "Reflections on Migration, Community, and Place," 413-414.

[47] Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), *South Bay Japanese American Community Needs Assessment*. 2017. https://www.ltsc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/sb_nikkei_needs_assessment5.pdf: 1.

structures like Girl Scout Troops and sports leagues, as well as foreign capital, such as Japanese corporations and chain restaurants. Co-ethnic spaces, such as ethnic churches, language schools, and ethnic neighborhoods, have historically provided Nisei and Sansei outlets for social networking and ethnic community building, particularly when they faced racial discrimination and residential segregation in the prewar and early postwar periods.[48] However, later Japanese Americans, such as the Yonsei, do not have these ethnic spaces available to them in their predominantly white, suburban neighborhoods. As a result, the Japanese American sports leagues, established in the 1920s, have "become a popular and viable outlet to 'stay connected' to other co-ethnics, while still 'assimilating' into their predominantly white suburban neighborhoods."[49] Such historic Japanese American institutions have been crucial in developing the ethnic identities of multigenerational Japanese Americans.[50] However, these organizations have not been significant for the shin-Nisei.

Informal social circles and multiracial groups have been more important to the shin-Nisei than the co-ethnic community organizations that have played vital roles for multigenerational Japanese Americans. When asked to define the members of his community, Ken responded, "Mainly school and sports friends. I still regularly talk to and hang out with a handful of my friends from high school. I also play Sunday league soccer, and the team consists of people my age from the South Bay."[51] Answering the same question, Ruth replied, "Family members, family friends, middle school friends, some church friends, and some work friends from this

[48] Christina Chin, "'We've Got Team Spirit!': Social Networking and Ethnic Community Building" in *Hoops, History*, *and Crossing Over: Boundary Making and Community Building in Japanese American Youth Basketball Leagues,* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 2012): 121-122.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Nicole Willms, "Introduction: 'This is What We Do,'" in *When Women Rule the Court: Gender, Race, and Japanese American Basketball* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017A): 29.

[51] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

current job."[52] The shin-Nisei's sense of community, however, may change over time, as it has for Anne. She explained,

> I wasn't even aware of Nikkei Student Unions [NSU] until after college, and I would think to myself, "If I had gone to a California school, would I have joined NSU?" I care a lot about the Nikkei community, but I also feel like I'm not sure I would have fit in, either. So… I feel less that way now…
> There's more of a willingness to join the existing Nikkei orgs that I think didn't exist before, and there's more of a welcoming from the historic JA organizations to include Japanese, I think, partly for survival in some ways.[53]

Having grown up in the United States, the shin-Nisei are gaining the attention of historic Japanese American groups who see them as significant to the future of the community.[54]

Furthermore, the diversity of the South Bay may make multiracial shin-Nisei, and their parents feel less like outsiders and more included by their peers. For example, Anne's parents decided to settle in the South Bay because they felt it was an environment that would be more accepting of a multiracial couple like them.[55] Kameyama explains, "…though they may not racially belong in a sense that their race is not invisible as it would be in Japan, but instead highly visible, the diverse ethnic make-up of Southern California particularly Los Angeles, allows shin-Issei to feel some belonging and inclusion s one minority among many."[56] The diversity of the South Bay may also make the region more comfortable for the increasing number of multiracial, multigenerational Japanese Americans, too. Clare added,

> The fact that I didn't have straight black hair, my eyes are a little lighter, things that I didn't realize. I thought I blended in, kind of because I was like, "Oh, I'm dark-haired, dark-eyed," but even to Japanese people, it was like, "Oh, you look different, what are you." So… I think usually people can tell that I'm Japanese

[52] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

[53] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[54] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 182-183.

[55] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[56] Kameyama, "Acts of Being and Belonging," 39.

> American, and I think usually, especially in the South Bay, other *hapa*s can tell a *hapa*.[57]

In the Japanese and Asian American communities, *hapa* refers to an Asian American or Pacific Islander of multiracial descent. However, *hapa* is originally a Hawaiian term referring to a multiracial person who has some Native Hawaiian ancestry. Native Hawaiian scholars, such as Haunani Kay Trask, have criticized Asian American appropriation of the term, creating a tension around its use.[58]

In sum, because of racial discrimination and rampant anti-Japanese and anti-Asian hostility during the prewar and postwar periods, the Issei and Nisei developed and relied on co-ethnic institutions and social structures, such as sports leagues, churches, language schools, and youth clubs, to build community and other support systems.[59] Their descendants, the Sansei and Yonsei, continue to do so today, although they are likely to belong to non-co-ethnic organizations as well. In contrast, the shin-Nisei in the 21st century have not needed to and have not done so. Clare also noticed this lack of other shin-Nisei in Japanese American spaces:

> …because now with my job, and I guess some of my outside activities, I've tried to connect more with the JA community and with the Asian community, doing a lot of community service, so I've been connecting more. But it does… I would say that most of the people I know are third-generation Japanese American. Not many people like me, I guess.[60]

Such distance between the two groups can cause some shin-Nisei to feel like an outsider to the community. For example, Anne highlighted the importance of being involved in Japanese American sports leagues as a marker of membership:

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[57] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[58] For more information, see: Angela S. Taniguchi, "Re-Mix: Rethinking the Use of 'Hapa' in Mixed-Race Asian/Pacific Islander American Community Organizing," *WSU Nair Journal* (2005): 137-138.

[59] Valerie J. Matsumoto, "The Social World of the Urban Nisei," in *City Girls: The Nisei Social World in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 30-32.

[60] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

> I think I was already outside of the Japanese American, Asian American community in some ways… I think in high school, I felt really different from Japanese Americans, like other Yonsei folks. I think because I didn't play basketball.[61]

However, Anne was the only shin-Nisei participant to express such feelings. This may be because other shin-Nisei are unaware of the Japanese American community organizations and events. When asked if the preservation of cultural practices, such as *Obon*, were important to him, Ken replied, "What's *Obon*?"[62] *Obon* is an annual Japanese Buddhist event to honor ancestors, held in the summer by Japanese Buddhist temples, sometimes in collaboration with Japanese American community centers, combining commemoration with fundraising activities. The Gardena Buddhist Church, for example, hosts an annual *Obon,* including *bon odori* accompanied by a live *taiko* performance.[63] According to the *Rafu Shimpo,* it is one of the largest *Obon* events in Southern California.[64] For Japanese Americans, *Obon* has taken on an expanded cultural significance, distinguishing it from *Obon* in Japan, both in practice and meaning.[65] Ken's question reaffirms Clare's previous observation that few shin-Nisei have joined Japanese American organizations and illustrates the shin-Nisei's unfamiliarity with the Japanese American community.

Altogether, this suggests that the shin-Nisei have a decreased reliance on ethnic

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[61] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[62] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[63] "*Bon odori*" refers to a Japanese traditional dance performed during *Obon*. In Japan, "*taiko*" means any kind of drum, but outside of Japan, it refers specifically to Japanese drums, usually used in Japanese folk and classical musical traditions.

[64] J.K. Yamamoto, "Gardena Buddhist Church Obon Festival This Weekend," *Rafu Shimpo,* July 30, 2026, https://rafu.com/2026/07/gardena-buddhist-church-obon-festival-this-weekend-2/. *Rafu Shimpo*, founded in 1903, is the bilingual English-Japanese newspaper based in Los Angeles County, California and reports on the Japanese American community and activities.

[65] In Japan, "*Obon*" is a Buddhist event where people honor their ancestors by cleaning their graves and often includes a dance.

community, compared to the prewar Issei and Nisei. The shin-Issei and shin-Nisei live in a different sociopolitical climate: a post-Civil Rights America with friendly relations with Japan. This may ease tensions between their ethnicity and the mainstream, allowing them to interact with other ethnic groups without the fear of hostility. The shin-Nisei's social networks are diverse, including multiethnic and mainstream peer networks.

Chapter 2: Settling in the South Bay

In a globalizing world, the concept of place has been reworked to be understood as relational, meaning that it is the product of historical and contemporary processes that influence migrants and their family's daily lives in their areas of settlement.[66] The reception of the contemporary arrival of multinational corporations and the shin-Issei was heavily influenced by the South Bay's history with the Japanese American community, negotiating their social settlement and shaping the perceptions of the racial-ethnic group.[67] This section traces the history of Japanese settlement in the South Bay region from the pre- and post-World War II period with multigenerational Japanese Americans, as well as contemporary times with the shin-Issei.

During the early twentieth century, the prewar Issei (first-generation) and Nisei (second-generation) aided the urbanization of Los Angeles by meeting the rapidly growing population's demand for food with fresh produce. In the South Bay, which, at the time, was farmland, Japanese Americans created an economic niche in strawberry cultivation, which did not challenge the profits of the neighboring white farmers, who specialized in grain, tomatoes, and poultry.[68] By the 1930s, Japanese Americans located in the South Bay, including Torrance and Gardena, established themselves in agriculture. Prewar Issei and Nisei faced obstacles to home and farm ownership in the South Bay due to California's Alien Land Laws, which prevented aliens who were ineligible for citizenship from buying land.[69] They also faced residential segregation enforced by restrictive covenants. For example, Torrance was founded in 1912 by

[66] Phillips and Robinson, "Reflections on Migration, Community, and Place," 410.

[67] Phillips and Robinson, "Reflections on Migration, Community, and Place," 415; 412.

[68] Noritaka Yagasaki and Kozo Fukase, "Japanese Farming, Urban Sprawl, and Changing Land Use in Gardena and Torrance of the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area," *Geographical Review of Japan Series B* 83(1) (2010): 20-23.

[69] Hillary Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration: Suburbanization and Transnational Citizenship in Southern California's South Bay," *Journal of Urban History* 40(1) (2014): 9.

Jared Torrance, a real estate developer who intended the city to be exclusive to white Americans only, barring People of Color (POC) from buying homes in the area by using restrictive housing covenants.[70]

World War II intensified racial hostilities and discrimination against Japanese Americans in the South Bay, who were among the first to be forcibly removed from their homes. On February 20, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the removal of all Japanese Americans from the West Coast to incarceration camps.[71] During this forced removal process, "reports soon spread of large-scale losses by Japanese Americans, and of scavengers and bargain hunters descending on Japanese communities to pressure the residents into disposing of their belonging for absurdly low sums."[72] Japanese Americans from the South Bay were sent to the Gila River, Jerome, and Rohwer camps.[73] By the end of World War II, the camps began to close and many Japanese Americans returned to the West Coast, where they continued to experience high levels of discrimination.

Despite changes in land laws and other policies, Japanese Americans continued to face obstacles in home and farm ownership. In 1952, the California Supreme Court invalidated the state's Alien Land Law of 1913 and its amendment in 1920, opening land ownership possibilities, especially farmland, to "aliens ineligible for citizenship," or Japanese American and other Asian communities.[74] These possibilities were expanded when the U.S. Supreme Court

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[70] Robert Phelps, "The Search for a Modern Industrial City: Urban Planning, the Open Shop, and the Founding of Torrance, California." *Pacific Historical Review* 64(4) (1995): 517.

[71] Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America,* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2009), 104.

[72] Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy,* 123.

[73] Densho, Sites of Shame. "Exclusion Order 2a," issued March 30, 1942; "Exclusion Order 6a," issued April 7, 1942; "Exclusion Order 29," issued April 30, 1942.

[74] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 9.

ruled in 1948 that residential segregation, imposed through restrictive housing covenants, which had affected many People of Color and Jewish people, was no longer legally enforceable. As a result, members of these communities jumped at the opportunity because residential mobility suggested higher socioeconomic status and first-class citizenship.[75] However, at the time, when Asian Americans and other People of Color looked for homes in the suburbs, such as the South Bay, they often faced resistance from white people looking to maintain segregation. To sidestep this hostility, many Japanese Americans relied on Japanese American real estate agents to determine if they were welcome in certain neighborhoods. At first, they moved into racially diverse areas such as Crenshaw but were careful not to associate themselves with other racialized people, choosing instead to align themselves with white neighbors.[76] Japanese Americans and other POC could not own homes in Torrance until the passage of the federal Fair Housing Act in 1968 outlawed restrictive covenants.

Following World War II, agriculture declined in the South Bay, due in part to the growth of defense industries on the West Coast, especially in San Pedro.[77] However, as white, middle-class families began to move into the area, the increasing demand for plant nurseries and gardeners, an economic niche racialized as Japanese, allowed Japanese Americans to leave the racialized suburbs of Southeast Los Angeles and enter white, suburban spaces. Many Japanese Americans settled in Gardena, a Japanese American community since before the war.[78]

There, Japanese Americans used their transnational ties to a thriving Japan to finally

[75] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 23.

[76] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 11-12.

[77] Yagasaki and Fukase, "Japanese Farming, Urban Sprawl, and Changing Land Use," 23-25.

[78] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 21.

achieve the full benefits of first-class citizenship tied to suburban homeownership.[79] By encouraging the movement of Japanese businesses and corporate investments into Gardena based on transnational ethnic and kinship networks, the Japanese Americans "saved" Gardena through economic development and revived it as a business hub to weather the financial storms of the late 1970s and early 80s.[80] The success of Gardena was narrated in thanks to the Japanese American community, increasing their value as residents of the suburbs and earning them "honorary whiteness."[81] Narratives of belonging for Japanese Americans in the South Bay often point to their economic contribution to the region, as a result.[82] Gardena then became heavily associated with its Japanese American population, shaping the South Bay to become a transnational hub for Japanese capital. This separated Gardena from other racialized spaces surrounding Los Angeles, such as Compton, distancing Japanese Americans from material Blackness, and instead linking the suburb to the South Bay with its white, middle- and upper-class spaces.[83] Soon, Japanese Americans began to move out of Gardena and southwest into Torrance and Palos Verdes.

The arrival of Japanese corporations in the South Bay brought Japanese (im)migrants and increased the demand for Japanese language schools, restaurants, and other services, such as car shops and hotels, that rely on Japanese language to communicate and conduct business. These opportunities for employment, which require little English language skill, constitute one of the driving forces for the settlement of Japanese immigrants in the South Bay, where the

[79] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 6.

[80] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 18.

[81] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 20.

[82] Phillips and Robinson, "Reflections on Migration, Community, and Place," 416.

[83] Jenks, "Seasoned Long Enough in Concentration," 21-23.

headquarters for Honda (and formerly, Toyota and Nissan) is located. The South Bay then became home to both the historic and "new" Japanese American populations.

For most of the shin-Nisei in this study, their shin-Issei parent(s) immigrated in their late 20s and early 30s during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This period was marked by the popping of the "Bubble Economy" in Japan. Massive economic restructuring and social upheavals, such as government deregulation and the privatization of welfare, led to growing unemployment, poverty, and homelessness.[84] Moreover, it left young Japanese looking to enter the workforce without stable jobs or career paths. Factors in Japan such as these may have encouraged the shin-Issei parents to look elsewhere for opportunities. And, for both men and women, the United States offered opportunities for non-traditional work.

For Japanese women, strict gender roles limited their life opportunities to becoming housewives and mothers, or part-time workers, which was then exacerbated by the worsening wage gap for women.[85] In the words of their children, the shin-Issei mothers came to the United States for the experience. Jane explained that her mother "wanted to expand her world; she was on some hippie trip."[86] Ken agreed and said, "I think she just wanted to live in the States, because that's- I guess, that was a whole- the vibe."[87] Roger added, "I think our generation of parents… they had a lot of money, and they would come to America, party for a couple of years, and move back. That was the trend, right?"[88] This perception of the United States developed as a result of the postwar U.S.-occupation of Japan during the 1950s, which promoted America as a

[84] Tritia Toyota, *Intimate Strangers: Shin-Issei Women and Contemporary Japanese American Community, 1980-2020,* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2024): 32-33.

[85] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 43-44.

[86] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

[87] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[88] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

fantasy.[89] The shin-Issei women also tended to view the United States as a place for "rejection of social norms and expectations in Japan," offering them more and better opportunities as women.[90] They arrived in the United States, educated with some junior college or college degrees, looking for life and economic opportunities beyond the typical office lady (OL) who performs secretarial or clerical work in an office with little to no opportunity for promotion.[91]

On the other hand, Japanese men were expected to become the stereotypical salaryman, the perfect representation of waged work and the economic miracle of postwar Japan.[92] However, this ideal was only afforded to those working in large companies with high-level positions. Most of the shin-Issei fathers in this study looked to the United States as a place to pursue independence and more career opportunities, especially those not readily available in Japan. Ken's father, for example, "was a helicopter pilot and because the business wasn't really that big in Japan, he wanted to pursue that dream in America."[93] Clare's father was a "a very creative man, and he actually moved to… the U.S., I guess, to kind of pursue photography. He was really, really a big travel photographer, and did modeling fashion photography, and so he lived in New York City."[94] Roger said,

> I think it's- the Japanese culture is great and all, but at the end of the day, it's quite uniform. It's quite… restricting, I think, especially from- I can see it from my dad's end. He's an architect. He's an artist, likes to show off his creativity and stuff like that, and I don't think he really has, or in his mind, I don't think he had the opportunity to do so in Japan.[95]

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[89] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 28-29.

[90] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 52.

[91] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 142.

[92] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 30.

[93] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[94] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[95] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

My interviewees' parents joined the growing trend of singular migration: immigrating not for marriage purposes, but instead, due to economic motivations.[96] While the life partners of the shin-Issei women in Tritia Toyota's study were U.S. citizens, in my study, for four of the six participants, both of their parents immigrated from Japan, unmarried and alone.[97] This might suggest that in later waves of immigration from Japan, more Japanese nationals have married other Japanese nationals, once they have already moved to the United States.

To be clear, none of the shin-Issei parents in this study arrived as employees of Japanese corporations, or *chuuzai-in*, nor did they have "the benefit of connections of family in the United States."[98] However, the establishment of Japanese corporations, which became possible because of multigenerational Japanese Americans acting as cultural brokers, may have encouraged their settlement in the South Bay, as Japanese capital transformed surrounding neighborhoods and offered jobs for Japanese-speakers at places such as restaurants, language schools, and car shops.[99] As a result, the South Bay became populated by both *chuuzai-in* and *eiju*, or permanent residents/green card holders.[100]

Once settled in such neighborhoods, the shin-Issei – often women – looked for other Japanese (im)migrants, creating a social network among themselves and their children through informal connections.[101] Many of the shin-Nisei in this study recalled that their co-ethnic friendships growing up were formed through their parents' personal connections. When creating these social circles, the shin-Issei looked for other Japanese (im)migrants like themselves,

[96] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 63; 73.

[97] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 74.

[98] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 102.

[99] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 94-95; 46-47.

[100] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[101] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 90.

meaning that the *chuuzai-in* and their families, who already have pre-established connections through their corporations, were not included.[102]

The arrival of the *chuuzai-in,* and subsequently the shin-Issei, diversified the class structure of the Japanese American community, creating divisions between the *chuuzai-in* and the shin-Issei, as well as between the *chuuzai*-in and multigenerational Japanese Americans. The arrival of Japanese corporations and workers in the South Bay brought an influx of Japanese capital to the region. In 1982, Toyota moved to a campus in Torrance, California and established headquarters there, followed soon after by other Japanese automobile corporations such as Honda and Nissan. The *chuuzai-in* are from the upper class, working as middle to upper managers in corporations, while the shin-Issei tend to come from the working class, placing them subordinate to the *chuuzai-in* in Japan.[103] This class dynamic has been carried over to the United States, even for the shin-Issei parents in this study, who tended to be more educated than the shin-Issei women in Toyota's research. The *chuuzai-in* pay little attention to the shin-Issei as they are seen as "supplemental workers laboring within the larger corporate arena."[104] Because they immigrated without corporate affiliation, the shin-Issei parents were not invited to childcare events, for example, for the *chuuzai-in* and their families, barred from full participation and living on the margins of the corporate networks.[105] On the other hand, multigenerational Japanese Americans resisted Japanese capital investment and resented the presence of the *chuuzai-in* in historic Japanese American communities.[106]

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[102] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 96.

[103] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 95.

[104] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 90.

[105] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 95-96; 101-102.

[106] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 90.

The shin-Issei's and shin-Nisei's relations with the *chuuzai-in* are influenced by Japanese corporate structures. The *chuuzai-in* and their families tend to only stay in the United States for three to five years at a time and eventually return to Japan.[107] Due to their temporary stint, the *chuuzai-in* and their families may be reluctant to socialize with the shin-Issei and shin-Nisei, and vice versa. The shin-Nisei also tend to perceive the *chuuzai-in* and their children as having stronger ethnic ties, most notably through their Japanese language fluency, marking a difference in cultural competency between the two groups.[108] As a result, shin-Issei social circles and networks are often non-corporate and mark social class parameters among Japanese immigrants, creating two separate communities in this demographic that have little to no interaction with each other.[109]

In the South Bay, the shin-Issei parents raised their children to be bilingual and bicultural, speaking to them in Japanese at home, sending them to Japanese language school, and travelling with them to Japan. In addition, their children grew up engaging with other ethnic groups in a multicultural South Bay that has shaped their identities in their young adulthood.

[107] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 16; Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[108] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[109] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 102.

Chapter 3: Maintaining Ties to Ethnic Heritage

The shin-Nisei in this study tended to describe their ethnic identities in a positive, multiculturalist frame, one that empowers ethnic heritage. In a study on immigrant young adults, Douglass Hartmann, Arturo Baiocchi, and Teresa Toguchi Swartz write, "For the substantial number of respondents who described themselves as 'proudly ethnic,' their hybrid Americanized identities were often framed as a positive accumulation of different cultural components—a blending of the best of both worlds."[110] When asked how her identity has changed over time, Ruth replied,

> I feel like it's the best of both worlds, 'cause I… am American, but then I have that "Oh, I'm Japanese," you know? I have a culture that I can show to people that I have and be a part of, and that's very special, I think.
> …I do like being Japanese, being a part of that culture, *nantte iuno [how should I say it]*… I have a positive… mindset about it? Yeah, I am proud to be Japanese. That's gotten… more and more. Now that I've gotten older, my proudfulness, I guess… that's not a word, but has gotten bigger. I'm proud to be Japanese.[111]

In the 21st century, Japanese identity is seen as a net positive in American society, as Ruth's response above suggests, due to historical processes such as the model minority stereotype and friendly relations with Japan that increased the accessibility and acceptance of Japanese culture in the United States. Furthermore, the shin-Nisei live on the peripheries of the *chuuzai-in* and their families, influencing their relationship to Japanese culture. Altogether, these factors impact their ties to ethnic heritage, which differ from those of the multigenerational Japanese Americans. This section explores how the shin-Nisei are developing their own sense of ethnic identity by maintaining ties to ethnic heritage through language, ethnic church, and social circles;

[110] Douglass Hartmann, Arturo Baiocchi, and Teresa Toguchi Swartz, "Navigating Americanized Identities: Bicultural Ethnicity, Race, and the Incorporation Experience," *Race and Social Problems* 10: 341.

[111] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

these ties have been strengthened by the normalization of Japanese and other Asian cuisines and popular culture.

The shin-Nisei in this study had two sources of Japanese language acquisition: through speaking with their parents at home and through formal education at Japanese language schools.[112] They attended Japanese language school every Saturday, usually in the mornings, where classes were taught and assignments were completed in Japanese. Although all the shin-Nisei in this study were sent to Japanese language school by their parents growing up, they did not think it had much impact on them. They remembered the experience with hatred or ambivalence. The shin-Nisei explained that they detested the idea of additional school, disliked studying, or felt it took time away from recreational activities. When asked why he didn't like Japanese language school, Roger said simply, "'Cause that's six days of school. It's a lot of school… I didn't like school as a kid."[113] In retrospect, Anne appreciated attending Japanese language school, however, "I only went up to third grade 'cause I wanted to play soccer."[114] Additionally, the shin-Nisei did not develop any lasting social ties with fellow students. When asked about friends at Japanese language school, Jane replied, "Yeah, I had friends there, but not close enough to where I keep in contact with them."[115]

In contrast, they placed significant value on speaking Japanese at home, with a few finding it sufficient for spoken language acquisition and fluency. When asked if he had wished he studied more, Ken, who learned Japanese from his parents and spoke it at home, replied, "No, I

[112] Clare, who has a Japanese immigrant father, is the only participant who did not grow up speaking Japanese at home. For more information on the parental role in language maintenance, see: Kim Kondo, "Socio-Psychological Factors Affecting Language Maintenance: Interviews with *Shin* Nisei University Students in Hawaii," *Linguistics Education* 9(4) (1998): 369-408.

[113] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[114] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[115] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

think I know enough to where I can call myself fluent and I can get by in conversation. I mean it would be cool, but I wouldn't wanna do that."[116] On the other hand, when asked if he enjoyed attending language school, Roger said, "As a kid? No, absolutely not. Now? I wish I had taken it more seriously."[117] In both his distaste and later regret, Roger echoed the feelings of prewar Nisei. Although she did not express regret about language school as Roger did, Jane did say, "I wish I could speak it [Japanese] better."[118] With the shin-Nisei, there are additional elements of class, race, and discrimination to consider in their experiences with language school, highlighting the dynamics within the Japanese diaspora and in Japan. Even though they believed it had no impact on their language acquisition, Japanese language school seemed to have considerable impact on the way they understood their Japanese and American identities.

The shin-Nisei participants were enrolled in two different types of Japanese language schools: *honshuukou* and Japanese Heritage Schools (JHS). *Honshuukou* not only taught the language, but also other subjects, such as math and Japanese history, reflecting their primary aim of educating the children of the *chuuzai-in* (businessmen), who would eventually return to Japan, where they would continue their education and build a life.[119] On the other hand, Japanese Heritage Schools (JHS) focused on language-learning. JHS were established in the early 1900s by prewar Issei to educate the growing Nisei population and serve as community centers in a period of anti-Japanese sentiment.[120] During the 1980s and 1990s, these language schools were revitalized by the increasing enrollment of the shin-Nisei by their shin-Issei parents.

[116] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[117] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[118] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

[119] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 112.

[120] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 110.

The shin-Nisei who attended *honshuukou* were aware of their differences from the children of the *chuuzai-in*. In describing his experience, Ken explained,

> More than half, they are from Japan, and their parents come here to work. And then they enroll their kids in this Saturday Japanese school. So, they- they're fluent, fluent in Japanese. They know what they're doing. And I'm just like, "Oh, dude, I don't know what that means," or stuff like that.
> …Oh my god, like history class? I didn't know half the things they were saying, 'cause I just didn't know what the- what words they were saying. And then when you get picked on, like popcorn reading? I think- I *hated* that because I was just so slow at reading.[121]

Ken went on to say that such interactions with the children of *chuuzai-in* at Japanese language school reaffirmed his American identity.

While they all attended Japanese language school, it is only the shin-Nisei of full Japanese descent who attended *honshuukou*, despite not being children of the *chuuzai-in.* The multiracial shin-Nisei, like Anne and Clare, attended JHS. Because *honshuukou* administrators assumed that multiracial shin-Nisei would not return to Japan and therefore, would not need a Japanese education, they were not admitted to *honshuukou*. Anne explained,

> …my mom actually worked part-time at *Asahigakkou*, one of the Japanese schools. At that time, they were very focused on *chuuzai-in* kids, so… they were- so, when my mom applied for me to enter there, I got rejected. They basically were like, "Well… she's half, and you're not even gonna go back to live in Japan, so she probably doesn't have interest in learning Japanese." And it's true, I probably would not have been able to hang with their homework program. But, but yeah, I mean, I was flat-out rejected, right?[122]

Her exclusion from *honshuukou* based on her mixed heritage may have caused Anne to feel more American and less Japanese.

[121] Ken, interview with author, July 2025. "Popcorn reading" refers the classroom practice of in which students take turns reading a text out loud.

[122] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

Anne's rejection reflects how multiracial shin-Nisei are stigmatized in Japan as *gaijin*, a derogatory Japanese term meaning foreigner.[123] After her parents' divorce, Anne said:

> I remember instances, too, where- you know, we'd go to a public pool, and my brother would start talking to me in English, and then there's this one time when the other kids were like, "*Gaijin da!"* and went to the other side of the pool, away from us.
> So, you know, and then I think when my parents got divorced, my mom considered moving back to Japan but realized it would be… challenging for us as multiracial kids…[124]

Multiracial shin-Nisei are often ostracized in Japan, perceived as not being "true" Japanese due to their mixed heritage.[125] The *chuuzai-in* then reproduce this racist stigma in the United States as demonstrated by Anne's rejection from *honshuukou.* For example, shin-Issei who marry non-Japanese Americans often met with social disapproval from *chuuzai-in* and their families.[126] However, Anne mentioned that the presence of multiracial Japanese in the public eye, such as tennis player Naomi Osaka, tends to cause a shift in Japanese attitudes toward mixed heritage.[127] Based on public opinion regarding such celebrities, attitudes toward multiracial shin-Nisei may alternate between inclusion and ostracization. In the United States, multiracial shin-Nisei disrupt ideas of what it means to be and look "Japanese" by highlighting the importance of qualities such as culture and language in ethnic identity. [128]

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[123] Sara Oikawa and Tomoko Yoshida, "An Identity Based on Being Different: A Focus on Biethnic Individuals in Japan," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 31 (2007): 642.

[124] Anne, interview with author, September 2025. *"Gaijin da!"* means "It's a foreigner!" in Japanese.

[125] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 83; Oikawa and Yoshida, "An Identity Based on Being Different," 641.

[126] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 103.

[127] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[128] Rebecca Chiyoko King, "Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race, and Beauty in Japanese American Beauty Pageants," in *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans,* ed. Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia L. Nakashima (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 170-171.

As Tritia Toyota found, the JHS can be an important bridge to build understanding between the *shin* and historic Japanese American communities because they offer learning opportunities to both the shin-Issei and shin-Nisei about the wartime incarceration.[129] The church and workplace have also emerged as sites for building such understanding: Anne learned about Japanese American history at church, rather than her Japanese heritage school in Gardena, and Clare through her work, rather than her Japanese heritage school in the San Fernando Valley.[130] The exclusion from *chuuzai-in* spaces and exposure to historic Japanese American spaces may explain why the multiracial shin-Nisei in this study are more involved in the historic JA community in adulthood through their jobs, compared to the shin-Nisei with two Japanese immigrant parents who were more likely to attend *honshuukou*.

Regardless of the type of Japanese language school they attended, my interviewees believed it had little, if any, impact on them. The shin-Nisei in this study maintained their Japanese fluency through speaking Japanese at home with their parents. As a result of engaging in Japanese primarily through speech, they tended to lack confidence in their reading and writing skills. While Japanese language school did not seem to impact the shin-Nisei in the way that their shin-Issei parents had hoped (i.e., maintenance of ethnic identity), admission to *and* exclusion from *honshuukou* may have reaffirmed their American identity and unsettled their identity as Japanese. Through their interactions at *honshuukou,* the shin-Nisei of full Japanese descent may have felt "less" Japanese due to a perceived difference in cultural competencies between themselves and the children of *chuuzai-in.* On the other hand, the multiracial shin-Nisei

[129] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 164-165.

[130] Anne, interview with author, September 2025; Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

may have felt “less” or not Japanese at all, due to their exclusion from *honshuukou* and other *chuuzai-in* networks.

The ethnic church has been an important institution for maintaining ethnic culture and creating social networks among Japanese immigrants from the prewar to postwar period, and this is the case for two shin-Nisei in this study.[131] Ruth and Anne belonged to Christian churches, providing them a bicultural space to interact with co-ethnics. Ruth, whose maternal grandfather was hired to be a pastor in Gardena from Japan, grew up attending church. She described her church as the Japanese division “because the pastor was Japanese, too, so it was literally only Japanese. Yeah, the sermons were in Japanese, too.”[132] Interactions like these among co-ethnics at church enable them to form social circles, share experiences, and develop their ethnic identity.[133] Moreover, Ruth’s church holds services in both the English and Japanese languages, suggesting that it serves both Japanese Americans and Japanese-speakers, providing an area of overlap between the two communities.

For Anne, church was the bridge between her shin-Nisei community and the historic Japanese American community, offering her more opportunities to interact with them. She explained, “And that's sort of where I learned about Japanese Americans, honestly, ‘cause I think up ‘til then, most of my experience had been with shin-Nisei.”[134] She remembered her first exposure to Japanese American confinement during World War II:

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[131] Matsumoto, “The Social World of the Urban Nisei,” 33-34.

[132] Ruth, interview with author, September 2025.

[133] Kim and Vietze, “Using Narrative Inquiry for Exploring Biculturalism and Resilience in Korean American Young Adults in New York City,” 16.

[134] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

> I went to Manzanar for the first time with them, they had a church camp- campout thing in Bishop. They had the JA fishing thing. And, stopped at Manzanar on the way, and that was before Manzanar had the interpretive center and everything. There was just the guard tower and the… the cemetery memorial, and we stopped there. I think I was… I want to say it was the summer between seventh and eighth grade. It could have been… sometime in middle school. And I didn't know anything about the JA experience, and then we went to Manzanar, and it was like, "What is this place?"
> And it was mostly the Japanese-speaking congregation, actually, and so somebody had made the effort to educate… the other Japanese speakers about Manzanar on our way up to Bishop. And that was my first exposure. And so, I think Gardena Valley Baptist Church, although it's not explicit, but there's- there are still people who… you know, I was in there with the youth, and then their parents or grandparents had mentioned things, or there'd be church potlucks, right? And it's like, "How did this spam musubi come about?" You know, and then just hearing those stories, it might not be a formal… it's not an Asian American Studies lesson, but… it's its own community history, right?[135]

Through her interactions at church, Anne learned about the history and cultural practices of multigenerational Japanese Americans. In this study, however, Anne is the exception because the other participants recall little or no interaction with the historic Japanese American community and its social groups during their childhood.

Through her work for a Japanese American legislator in California, Clare observed this division in the Japanese American community. She explained,

> I see a lot of those people being a lot more involved in community organizations and those Japanese American groups and activities and events, vs. shin-Issei, shin-Nisei, I don't- I don't really see any sort of community from them that's conversing [converging] into the American culture.[136]

When she said, "those people," she is referring to what she called "multigenerational Japanese Americans," or the historic Japanese American community, such as the Yonsei.

The shin-Issei and shin-Nisei appear to build co-ethnic networks outside the historic Japanese American institutions. Five of the six shin-Nisei participants stated that they met their

[135] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[136] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

co-ethnic friends growing up through their parents' relationships with other shin-Issei. Roger explained who his co-ethnic friends were growing up: "When I was younger, it was definitely more second, just 'cause you know, parents' friends- my parents' friends were Japanese and their kids, second generation."[137] As he suggests, the shin-Nisei's ethnic community has been formed through shin-Issei friendship networks and informal socializing outside of formal institutions. This socializing among the shin-Nisei demonstrates the division within the Japanese American community that Clare observed.

Like speaking Japanese at home with their parents or interacting with co-ethnic social circles, food is another way that the shin-Nisei maintain their ethnic heritage and identity. Food serves as a vehicle for individuals to perform their group membership, status, and ethnic identity. Folklore scholar Susan Kalčik explains,

> As Molly Schuchat says of ethnic groups in the United States, "it can be seen that food style is not based on geography and/or economics alone, but becomes a means of self-identity as well as a group-membership card […] Foodways provide a whole area of performance in which statements of identity can be made – in preparing, eating, serving, forbidding, and talking about food.[138]

Activities such as sourcing, cooking, and eating Japanese food are popular among Japanese American residents in the South Bay.[139] The shin-Nisei participants all stated that their parents shopped at Nijiya Market, along with Mitsuwa and Tokyo Central. Roger said that he does not have many connections to Japanese traditions, but food is one way he feels he maintains a link to his ethnic identity. He explained,

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[137] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[138] Susan Kalčik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and Performance of Identity," in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the U.S.: The Performance of Group Identity,* ed. Linda Keller Brown and Kav Mussell (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 54.

[139] LTSC, *South Bay Japanese American Community Needs,* 14; Tat Shum and Terence Chun, "Culinary Diaspora Space: Food Culture and the West African Diaspora in Hong Kong," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 29(2) (2020): 285-286.

> I try to do it more internally, meaning I try to learn recipes. My dad's the one who's a really good cook in my house. So I'm trying to learn recipes, and I cook it here and I eat the Japanese food. So that's the way I preserve their [parents'] culture within my lifestyle.[140]

The city where he lives in Massachusetts while attending graduate school does not include a large Japanese American community. He explained, "It's really rare to meet anyone Japanese in Boston, in Washington, and literally outside of the South Bay, outside of California."[141]

Ruth explained that her connections to Japan are maintained largely through her aunt, a flight attendant who works on international flights between the United States and Japan. As in Roger's case, food is an avenue for Ruth to maintain a connection to her ethnic heritage. She explained,

> We're pretty fortunate, because my aunt does a lot of that for us. She's the person that gets all of these foods that we wouldn't be able to get in America from Japan. Because she's been our- she's a flight attendant that brings… stuff. So I think that's the reason why we've been able to maintain that kind of culture, that's very Japanese-based.[142]

Ruth maintains ties to ethnic heritage through food made by Japanese businesses, such as gummies and Baumkuchen from Muji, or ingredients that are more expensive in the United States than in Japan, such as matcha powder.[143] She added, "This is so weird, but sometimes I get Pretz, Hi-Chew, and Calpico from Japan 'cause even though they sell it in America, it tastes so different! The ones they manufacture in America isn't yummy."[144] Although she has access to

[140] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[141] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[142] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

[143] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025. Baumkuchen is a type of layered cake in German cuisine that is extremely popular in Japan.

[144] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025. Pretz is a popular Japanese pretzel-like snack with sweet and savory seasonings. Hi-Chew is a chewy Japanese candy. Calpico is a Japanese probiotic milk beverage.

some of these snacks in the United States, she prefers the flavor profile of food products from Japan.[145]

The shin-Nisei's Japanese language skills have allowed them to work at Japanese immigrant businesses, like their parents. Ruth worked at Nijiya Market, a Japanese chain grocery store, and a Japanese restaurant before she became a flight attendant. At both jobs, her Japanese proficiency was valued because her employers aimed to serve Japanese-speaking customers. As a result, Japanese restaurants in the South Bay look to hire Japanese immigrants or the shin-Nisei. When she recalled her time working at a Japanese restaurant, Ruth said, "My Japanese got way better. I was able to speak *keigo* way more fluently."[146] Other businesses and social services follow a similar model as demonstrated by Ken's father, who worked as a car mechanic for a Japanese business, which decreased his reliance on English.[147]

Outside of shin-Nisei circles, Japanese language and culinary knowledge act as significant markers of ethnicity. Anne remembered hearing co-ethnic community members at work discussing the decline in the Japanese American community. She explained,

> …when I first started working at LTSC, and there were a lot of conversations about- at that time, there were questions about… the decline of the Japanese American community, and there were people who literally were like, "Oh, it's because of people like you and your mom who married outside your race that the Japanese community is in decline." And I'd be like, "Who speaks Japanese? Who cooks Japanese food?"[148]

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[145] Tokyo Stash, Inc., "Smaller, Lighter, Less Sweet: How Japanese Snacks Differ from the Rest of the World," *Tokyo Stash* (blog), May 8, 2026. https://www.tokyostash.com/blogs/culture-stories/japanese-snacks-differ-from-western: Japanese snacks made in Japan for domestic consumption differ from Japanese snacks intended for export to the United States, regarding qualities such as sweetness, size, etc.

[146] Ruth, interview with author, July 2025. "*Keigo*" refers to honorific speech in Japanese, used to convey respect; it is often used in business and formal social settings.

[147] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[148] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

Anne referenced her Japanese language skills and ability to prepare Japanese food to assert her ethnic identity as a multiracial shin-Nisei in co-ethnic spaces.

By contrast, Jane does not know how to prepare Japanese food nor does she intend to learn. While she still eats Japanese food at restaurants, she explained, "I feel like it takes a lot of effort to make Japanese food. It's not as- it's more- there's a lot more steps than if I were to assemble a sandwich, you know?"[149] This is a common pattern observed in immigrant families, where the immigrant parents tend to hold fast to their ethnic cuisine, particularly in its labor-intensive preparation, while their American-born children adapt to American foodways, prioritizing modernity and convenience.[150]

Likewise, Ken often eats and enjoys everyday Japanese food, such as curry which is always stocked in his apartment in San Jose where he lives with white American roommates. However, he expressed distaste for holiday dishes. When describing the Japanese traditions with which he grew up, he said,

> I hate the New Year's food. My mom would make me eat it. Hated it. But I think the values definitely- so, like I said before, the respect and stuff like that. The practices of… culturally significant stuff, I'm not- it's cool, but I'm not, I don't know if I would go out of my way to continue that.[151]

In saying his mother would "make him eat it," Ken demonstrates the intersection of gender roles and culture. Women are often responsible for the maintenance of ethnic culture, as demonstrated by the prewar Nisei women's organizations that held classes on

[149] Jane, interview with author, September 2025.

[150] Kalčik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and Performance of Identity," 40; Elisha P. Renne, "Mass Producing Food Traditions for West Africans Abroad," *American Anthropologist* 109(4) (2007): 618; 623.

[151] Ken, interview with author, September 2025.

Japanese cooking to maintain their ties to Japanese heritage.[152] This gendered dynamic is then reaffirmed when Ken said that he would most likely not continue the tradition.

The concentration of Japanese (im)migrants in the Southeast of Torrance offered opportunities for other Japanese businesses to open, such as restaurants and grocery stores. According to an LTSC report, ethnic grocery stores are the most popular place to go, where Japanese (im)migrants can not only shop, but also meet for business and social gatherings to relax and enjoy Japanese food.[153] And like their parents, the shin-Nisei in this study frequent Nijiya Market, Mitsuwa, and Tokyo Central.

The presence of Japanese grocery stores indicates the growing appeal and accessibility of Japanese food to mainstream consumers. Japanese Americans "carved out a place for Kikkoman shoyu and other Japanese flavors and foods in U.S. restaurants and suburban homes by calibrating a comfortable degree of foreignness and by utilizing the residential dispersal of Japanese Americans out of ethnic enclaves and into new neighborhoods."[154] As a result, Japanese foodstuff is commonplace in the (white) suburbs, most notably through grocery stores and restaurants because of the ease with which Japanese flavors have been "assimilated" by the American palate.[155] Japanese food has become increasingly popular in the mainstream, gaining positive value. When asked about the popularity of Japanese cuisine since childhood, Jane said,

[152] Matsumoto, "The Social World of the Urban Nisei," 52-53.

[153] Shum and Chun, "Culinary Diaspora Space," 290; LTSC, *South Bay Japanese American Community Needs Assessment,* 15.

[154] Meredith Oda, "'Kikkoman, USA:': The Residential and Economic Integration of Japanese Americans and Japanese Foods," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23(2) (2020): 269.

[155] Oda, "'Kikkoman, USA,'" 274.

"I think people are a lot more open to trying Japanese food because it's so common now vs. before, I think people were more- they weren't willing to even try it."[156]

Anne echoed a similar sentiment, expressing shock upon hearing that people are now willing to try more "exotic" Japanese food, such as uni (sea urchin roe). She explained,

> Japanese food, for- I mean, that's a huge change, too, that… you'll have… non-Japanese people, non-Asian people saying, "Oh yeah, sushi is my favorite," and I- not just- not just California rolls, they would be like, "Oh, uni!" or something, right? And you're like, "Oh! Okay."[157]

The shin-Nisei have also felt the impact of the increasing popularity of Asian pop culture, such as anime, bubble tea, and K-pop, in the United States. Roger felt that the popularity of K-pop has made him feel more accepted as an Asian American and that he has benefitted from it. He explained,

> It definitely introduced Asian culture to a wider audience. Right? I think we can agree on that. And then, by doing so, my identity, my culture, understanding myself… it kind of- it bridged the gap. Because sometimes, for example, if you're eating rice at lunch, you know, while other people, when kids are eating sandwiches, you know, they'll be like, "Oh, why are you eating that?" It's- well, and then, before it'd be like, "Why are you eating that?" And now it's like, "Oh, cool! You're eating rice for lunch," and it's easier understanding between the two- two cultures.[158]

For Roger, food gains social meaning as a marker of acceptance between cultures, creating spaces for cultural sharing.[159] These increases in popularity and acceptance in the mainstream can lead to feelings of greater social inclusion in the national identity.[160] The shin-Nisei participants all stated that Japanese cuisine, ranging from matcha to udon, was popular among

[156] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

[157] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[158] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[159] Shum and Chun, "Culinary Diaspora Space," 287.

[160] Shum and Chun, "Culinary Diaspora Space," 284.

their diverse friend groups, making Japanese food the center of social gatherings. The act of sharing food, especially when it is considered "safe" in the public sphere, encourages community integration and social inclusion within the mainstream.[161]

Other cultural products, such as anime, have also made the shin-Nisei feel accepted in the American identity. Ruth, for example, sees the popularization of anime in the mainstream as a positive:

> It used to not be cool, but then suddenly everyone watches it, and it's a cool thing now, and people boast about it, even!
> … So… I think over the years, it's gotten really great, 'cause, you know, Asian culture is more out there, Japanese culture is more out there, people appreciate it more, and don't make fun of it.

Positive social reception of the shin-Nisei's ethnicity, such as the acceptance of "exotic" foods and anime in the mainstream, make maintaining ties to ethnic heritage more acceptable. The increased acceptance and social status of Japanese culture in the American mainstream makes their Japanese ethnicity compatible with the national American identity, too.

[161] Kalčik, "Ethnic Foodways in America," 48.

Chapter 4: Identifying as American

In her research on narratives about belonging in Japan, Giulia Dugar found that immigrant-origin youth "look at their Japanese native peers and consider the gaps existing between them and the local generation, who step by step turns to embody their point of reference."[162] Identity formation then becomes a social process based on conforming to one's relational or situational context and thus, conforming to the expectations of the audience that supports their identity, out of fear of conflict and rejection of their identity.[163] A person's context, whether social or regional, has a profound impact on their national identification. Asian Americans are often stereotyped as the forever foreigner, depicted as non-citizens born abroad with loyalty to the Asian "homeland" and not the United States.[164] Therefore, in the mainstream imagination, the shin-Nisei may not be considered "true" Americans. However, most of the participants in this study stood firm in their American-ness. When asked where people assume they are born and how they identify themselves, the shin-Nisei participants related their national identity to how they perceive the American identity, drawing from mainstream and gendered stereotypes, and their multicultural upbringing in diverse neighborhoods and environments.

Mainstream stereotypes have portrayed Asian women as submissive, quiet, and subservient, and, according to a study by Brian TaeHyuk Keum et al. on the gendered and racialized socialization of second-generation Asian American women, many of the participants

[162] Giulia Dugar, "Navigating One's Own Belonging: Envisaging the Japanese (Im)migratory Stratification through Immigrant-Origin Youths' Narratives," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 32(6) (2024): 15.

[163] Wasana Sampath Handapangoda, "Identity Production on Social Media: The Narrative of Second-Generation Youth of Sinhalese Sri Lankan Origin in New Zealand," *Journal of New Zealand Studies* NS21 (2015): 40.

[164] Brian TaeHyuk Keum, et al., "Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale for Asian American Women: Development and Initial Validation," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 65(5) (2018): 572.

internalized these mainstream expectations.[165] This means that the participants in the Keum et al. study have acknowledged and/or accepted these stereotypes and consider them when thinking about their identity. The shin-Nisei also grapple with this stereotyping that happens at the intersection of race and gender. When asked if she had experienced discrimination, Ruth initially answered "No," then added,

> Sometimes I feel like people… don't treat me… seriously, because I'm Asian, if that makes sense? But that's also very interesting, because that might just what- what I'm thinking, how I… deduce the situation. I'm like, "Are they treating me like that because I'm a woman, or am I- because I'm Asian, and they're just thinking I'm a dumb little Asian girl?"[166]

Clare, too, has confronted this racial and gendered stereotyping. Growing up, she remembered being "surrounded by a lot of American people that *love* Japanese culture" to the point where she felt it was appropriation.[167] "It's too focused on the sexual nature of it," she said, "it feels like a fetish a little bit."[168] Then when asked if she had experienced discrimination, she replied,

> …going back to what I mentioned with fetishizing and the sexual nature of being a Japanese woman, I think that has always been prevalent, and it's a weird thing, because it's… it's definitely racism, but the way people kind of use it at you, they try not to make it a negative thing, but it definitely is.
> So, I just remember, kind of being in high school or college and getting some weirdly anime sexual jokes that I didn't understand 'cause I didn't watch anime.[169]

Reflecting on such "jokes," Clare said, "I think it was really hard for me to kind of grapple with people's enjoyment of anime, because I only saw one perspective of it."[170]

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[165] Keum et al., "Gendered Racial Microaggressions," 573; Lydia HaRim Ahn et al., "Second-Generation Asian American Women's Gendered Racial Socialization," *American Psychological Association* 69 (2022): 130-131.

[166] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

[167] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[168] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[169] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[170] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

Three of the four shin-Nisei women in this study narrated their American identity along these stereotypes and expectations, reflecting Kristina Bakkær Simonsen's concept of "boundary perception," or the symbolic and social boundaries that shape "second-generation immigrants' ideas about what includes and excludes them from being part of the nation."[171] When asked where people assume she was born, Jane responded, "I think because when I first meet people, I'm very shy and I don't talk much. So I give off a very… FOB vibe."[172] By "FOB," she meant "fresh off the boat," a phrase often used to describe immigrants from Asia, especially those who are unassimilated. Although she was born in the United States, Jane tied the perception of her being born abroad to her shyness, an expected trait for an Asian woman.

On the other hand, Clare responded, "Usually American-born, and I think a lot of that's just also cultural. I'm a more outgoing person, too."[173] Clare narrated her American identity in opposition to the mainstream stereotypes about Asian women citing her gregariousness as proof of her American-ness.

Anne also marked her difference from perceptions of Asian American women. She recalled her mother was concerned about her getting married, asking, "Who's gonna want to put up with you?" because, as Anne explained, "I think for an Asian American woman, I'm pretty outspoken, right?"[174] Anne narrated her outspoken-ness as deviating from the mainstream perceptions of Asian American women or, at the very least, deviating from how her mother expected her to behave. By narrating their American identities according to mainstream

[171] Kristina Bakkær Simonsen, "What It Means to (Not) Belong: A Case Study of How Boundary Perceptions Affect Second Generation Immigrants' Attachments to the Nation," *Sociological Forum* 33(1) (2018): 121.

[172] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

[173] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[174] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

expectations, the shin-Nisei women often demonstrate the internalization of such narratives or the acknowledgement of such stereotypes.

Positive social relationships also contribute to the shin-Nisei's strong identification with the United States. While the shin-Nisei felt out of place in Japan, they felt comfortable in the United States. Simonsen frames this phenomenon as "belonging in" a nation, where an individual has intimate knowledge of society and its norms or, in other words, "know[s] how things work."[175] For example, when asked if he ever felt out of place in Japan, Ken replied,

> I'm very aware of American culture. And I lived here my whole life. I speak Japanese- my English is way better than my Japanese so it's just- if I'm going around the States, I can read every single sign, you know, or yeah, if I'm ordering food I know when to say please and thank you, or exact words to say to be polite about it. But- so yeah, so everything in the States, I can understand why something's happening and I know the response to it.
> In Japan, I don't when to say *konnichiwa [hello]* compared to *ohayogozaimasu [good morning]*, stuff like that. I don't know the distinction between those, so I struggle with that, so I just end up not saying anything.[176]

As Ken noted, language fluency plays a significant role for his interpersonal relations in each country. Jane agreed and added,

> [In Japan] I definitely had a hard time communicating with people… also, I feel like they're very judgy over there. You can't- you're not allowed- (clears throat) allowed to take up space type of thing, you have to be super quiet on the trains, you… I don't know. It was like sometimes, *sometimes*, it was like walking on eggshells.[177]

Ruth's experience in Japan incorporates a gendered element. Ruth remarked on how, whenever she visits Japan, she becomes more self-consciousness about her physical appearance. She explained,

> I don't properly do my makeup every day, I don't do my hair properly every day. I feel like Japanese people are way more put together. Like visually. Hair, makeup,

[175] Simonsen, "What It Means to (Not) Belong," 133.

[176] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[177] Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

> and clothes-wise. And also, body shape, too. I feel like that's a huge thing; I always feel out of place. I feel super self-conscious when I'm in Japan… I just think Japanese people are like, "Oh, you gained weight," "Oh, you're not healthy," or "You need to lose weight," more often than Americans. An example is, I feel more okay with my body when I'm in San Fran 'cause no one really talks about it, and I just live day-to-day like that.[178]

As Ruth suggested above, in Japan, women are expected to be extremely thin, as promoted by both Japanese and Western media.[179] Much of Ruth's sense of being "out of place" in Japan can be attributed to her not fitting into the beauty standards and other gendered expectations of Japanese women.

Such feelings of disconnection from Japanese etiquette and norms make the shin-Nisei feel more "at home" in the United States than in Japan. As a result, the shin-Nisei hesitate to assert themselves as Japanese and "repeatedly draw distinctions between themselves and those in Japan."[180] Their familiarity with American norms causes them to have a stronger attachment to the United States and thus, tend to identify as American rather than Japanese. The shin-Nisei then socialize with those with whom they share "culture, language, gender roles, and/or had a similar value system," expanding their social circle beyond their ethnic group and embracing diverse social networks.[181]

When asked where people assume she was born, Ruth explained that in Southern California, where she grew up in a large pan-ethnic and co-ethnic population, she never thought about it because she thought everyone assumed she was American. Living in an ethnic

[178] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

[179] Kanako Ando et al., "Beauty Ideals, Social Media, and Body Positivity: A Qualitative Investigation of Influences on Body Image on Young Women in Japan," *Body Image* 38 (2021): 358-359.

[180] Kameyama, "Acts of Being and Belonging," 47.

[181] Ibid.

neighborhood fosters and normalizes a sense of community.[182] Hartmann et al. explain, "…these neighborhoods help people like them 'feel connected' with their friends and family members, as well as created a space to practice and engage with cultural traditions important to their sense of belonging."[183] However, when she moved to Houston, Texas to train to be a flight attendant, Ruth was asked where she was from and when she immigrated. She recalled,

> They were like, "Oh yeah, so you were born in Japan, right? When did you come to America?" And I'm like, "Oh my god." I didn't even… I was… I was like (gasp), you know? Not that that's a bad thing, but I was- I've never gotten that, so, it kind of did shock me, to the point where I was like, "Oh, guys, I'm American!"[184]

Such interactions unsettled her faith in perceptions of her American identity, making her assert her birthplace more often now. "That's another thing I always say when I'm talking to new people at work," she explained. "I'm like, 'Oh yeah. Born and raised… from Los Angeles.'"[185] Outside of the South Bay, Ruth rewords her introduction and shifts the framing of her identity to adjust to changing social relationships with those around her, demonstrating the link between place and identity.[186] Still, she reaffirmed her American identity. This may be because her childhood in the South Bay cemented her belief in her American identity, so it remains unshakeable in her young adulthood.

Growing up in racially diverse neighborhoods in the South Bay enabled some shin-Nisei to develop strong ties with other racial-ethnic groups. Roger grew up with Black, Latino, and Filipino neighbors and played soccer with Mexican teammates. He explained, "I think South Bay

[182] Hartmann, et al., "Navigating Americanized Identities," 340.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

[185] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

[186] Grey and O'Toole, "The Placing of Identity and the Identification of Place," 207; 209.

is America. It's, you know, it's a very unique part of America, but it might be the most- biggest mixing pot, as they say."[187] Like Roger, Ken played soccer with non-Japanese American peers. He said,

> My soccer team was pretty much all Mexican 'cause they're just so good at soccer. So I was lucky enough to be- they weren't racist towards me. They saw me as one of them. They would invite me to all their events and kind of embrace- not embrace, I don't know, just help me adapt to Mexican culture so it was really cool.[188]

Ken was also raised in a multicultural environment, rather than one limited to people of Japanese or Asian descent. This allows the shin-Nisei to orient themselves to multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, shaping their definition of national identity to be more inclusive.[189] Fethi Mansouri and Taghreed Jamal Al-deen explain,

> …being different and living in diverse places provided exposure to multiple cultures and differences, helping develop "many socio-cultural competencies and interpersonal skills", such as nuanced cultural awareness, open-mindedness and empathy towards people of different cultural backgrounds.[190]

But living in areas with little, if any, diversity can cause Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to feel isolated and out of place, as Ruth did when she moved to Houston for work.[191]

[187] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[188] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

[189] Fethi Mansouri and Taghreed Jamal Al-deen, "Acts of Transcultural Belonging and Social Empowerment Among Migrant Youth," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46(10): 2007.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Hartmann, et al., "Navigating Americanized Identities," 340-341.

Chapter 5: Redefining Japanese American Identity

While all the shin-Nisei in this study identify as Japanese American, what that identity means to them differs significantly from multigenerational Japanese Americans. For example, when asked what Japanese American identity means to them, Jane responded, "Just being of Japanese descent," and Roger answered, "There's got to be some Japanese in you."[192] Clare, too, reaffirmed their answers and explained,

> Japanese American, I think… can be anyone that has any sort of Japanese ancestry in them, not necessarily just 50%. I think especially 'cause now that we're… we're approaching this world where we're gonna have multicultural Japanese Americans, and I think that's- that's okay, and that's an awesome thing.[193]

Such responses reflect how the shin-Nisei's definition deviates from that of the historic Japanese American community, which, as Lorine E. Saito explains, is rooted in generational status tied to collective history.[194] This section compares and analyzes those differences, such as generational labels and markers.

The categorization of individuals into age-cohorts, or generation, can be understood as a social phenomenon informed by a collective class position, defined as a common location certain individuals hold in economic and power structure of a given society.[195] In her research on JA basketball leagues, Nicole Willms highlights the importance of generation: "Japanese Americans who represent the dominant culture of the J-Leagues are descendants of a particular wave of Japanese immigration. Therefore, the community itself identifies itself in generational terms."[196] For Asian American communities, generations have often been constructed relative to historical

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[192] Roger, interview with author, July 2025; Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

[193] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[194] Saito, "The Complexity of Generational Status and Ethnic Identity of Japanese Americans," 215.

[195] Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," *The Psychoanalytic Review* 57(3) (1963): 379.

[196] Willms, "Introduction," 25. "J-Leagues" refers to the Japanese American sports leagues.

traumas. These traumas become collective events around which ethnic community is created, defining what it means to be a member of that group.[197]

For Japanese Americans descended from prewar Japanese immigrants, the forced uprooting and incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II is a key event around which they organize themselves into age-cohorts, or generation. Moreover, U.S. immigration legislation shaped periods of Asian American history and Japanese American generation, particularly the Immigration Act of 1924, ending Asian immigration (except for Filipinos) and creating a singular wave of prewar Issei.[198] This caused their descendants, the historic Japanese American community, to be organized into discrete age cohorts or generations.

Multigenerational Japanese Americans describe themselves as such because of a shared experience relating to wartime incarceration, making it a defining feature of ethnic community and membership.[199] For the Sansei (third generation), a collective experience was the silence of their parents, the Nisei, about their incarceration experiences during World War II and the subsequent distancing from and denial of Japanese American heritage and history.[200] For the Yonsei, cultural loss as a result of wartime incarceration is a shared experience among the population, making the generational term "Yonsei" an important identity.[201] Saito explained,

> The defining characteristic of being a Yonsei is the grandparents' suffering through their incarceration during WWII. This leads into the relationships they have with other Yonsei in keeping the community together. Yonsei identity is part

[197] Jieyi Cai and Richard M. Lee, "Intergenerational Communication about Historical Trauma in Asian American Families," *Adversity and Resilience Science* 3 (2022): 239.

[198] Lorine E. Saito, "How Historical Context Matters for Fourth and Fifth Generation Japanese Americans," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 14.1(2) (2020): 3.

[199] Ibid.

[200] Karen L. Suyemoto, "Ethnic and Racial Identity in Multiracial Sansei: Intergenerational Effects of the World War II Mass Incarceration of Japanese Americans," *Genealogy* 2(26) (2018): 2.

[201] Donna K. Nagata, Nidhi A. Tigadi, and Mia Shin, "Transgenerational Impacts of Historical Trauma Among World War II Japanese American Incarceration Survivors' Grandchildren," *Asian American Psychology* (2024): 7.

> of the Japanese American identity that is built from their ancestors' community centers and organizations.[202]

Belonging to the Japanese American community is thus marked by one's ability to relate to and connect with others through generation.

The shin-Nisei, however, do not share that family or collective history with the multigenerational Japanese Americans and so, do not have the same connection to the label. When describing how her Japanese American identity has developed over time, Anne remembered once using the term Nisei to describe herself. In response, "a very respected person in the Nikkei community, who's older and is an educator, got really mad at me, saying, 'You're not Nisei. Nisei is just for this generation.' You know, from the original Issei, Nisei, Sansei."[203] In saying this, *shin* becomes a marker of difference in the community, a difference that Anne, Roger, Ruth, and Clare acknowledge is important to distinguish them from the prewar Nisei. Roger explained, "I feel like it's definitely harder for- it was easier for me to get accepted as a Japanese American than it was 50, 70 [years ago], you know. Pre-World War."[204]

Generational labels and markers do not seem to hold any significance for the shin-Nisei. Clare and Anne were familiar with the term "shin-Nisei," having heard it before in Japanese American spaces, such as their workplace, while Roger, Ken, Jane, and Ruth had never heard the term before and guessed its meaning as "new second generation" based on their Japanese language skills. When asked if they had heard of the term, Clare replied, "Yeah, I think I've heard of it. Let's see, I think probably through some of my work. I… I don't think I heard about it at all in my childhood."[205] To the same question, Roger responded, "Like *atarashii [new],* like new

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[202] Saito, "The Complexity of Generational Status and Ethnic Identity of Japanese Americans," 216.

[203] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[204] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[205] Clare, interview with author, September 2025;

second generation? No, I have not."[206] "*Shin*" and "*atarashii*" are two ways of reading the same kanji, meaning new. However, none of the shin-Nisei participants use the term to describe themselves. Moreover, throughout the interviews, the shin-Nisei, except Anne and Ruth, rarely used generational labels, such as Nisei or Yonsei, to describe other Japanese Americans. Anne provided a potential explanation for this, saying,

> It's true that in Japan, you don't use Issei, Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei the way we typically do in JA culture, like it means generally… So, it is… it is kind of a unique usage. On the other hand, to say generation, so it's not technically *wrong*.[207]

Ruth said that she does not use generational labels to describe herself. While she recognizes that the historic Japanese American community practices "traditional and old-fashioned and *furui [old]*" culture compared to her own Japanese culture, Ruth does not see "shin-Nisei" as an important part of her Japanese American identity.[208] She explained, "I wouldn't even think to use shin-Nisei in a day-to-day conversation… I would only call myself a *nikkei-jin* or- yeah, *Nisei wa anmari iwanaikara [I don't say Nisei often]. Nikkei-jin*, I would only say that."[209]

Often unaware of the historic forces that have shaped the Japanese American community and cultural practices, postwar Japanese immigrants are sometimes surprised by how greatly customs differ from practices in Japan. Anne observed these tensions at her work, where Japanese-speakers would come to her with concerns about the Japanese American community and their interactions with them. She explained,

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[206] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[207] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[208] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

[209] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025. "*Nikkei-jin*" is a Japanese term referring to people of Japanese descent living outside of Japan.

> …there were new *matsuri*s *[festivals]* formed because Japanese from Japan would go to the Buddhist church *Obon*s, and be like, "This is not what *Obon* supposed to be," right? So there was kind of competition, or I think Japanese Americans may have felt that Japanese were looking down on them, and a lot of the Japanese folks were not taking the time- they didn't know about, because their own governments wouldn't- don't even talk about World War II, they didn't know about the Japanese-American experience during World War II, right?[210]

It is the shin-Issei who more acutely notice differences in ties to ethnic heritage such as cultural practices and language skills between themselves and the historic Japanese American community. Roger agreed and explained,

> I think there's- from their [shin-Issei] perspective, it's like, "If you don't speak Japanese, I have to speak my broken English," and I can assure you that this is probably true across all racial identities. But if you can't speak the native language properly with the right accent, with the right tone, you know, etc., you will- there will be a part of you that's naturally insecure about that, and that- you know, that changes the dynamic a lot, at least from what I've seen.[211]

The other participants echo this sentiment. Language then becomes a significant barrier in building understanding between the historic Japanese American community and the shin-Issei.[212] Such a dynamic, especially based on the persistence of cultural differences, may create boundaries between the two groups, causing different identities to develop.[213]

The shin-Nisei, on the other hand, may be less able to recognize the difference between themselves and other Japanese Americans. For example, as the interview reached its close, Ken suddenly asked me, "What generation are you?" When I told him that I am a Yonsei, he replied,

> Are you really? Anything like that! I- how long- I've known you for twenty years? And- I don't know, but I didn't know that about you. I don't think it affected our interactions.[214]

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[210] Anne, interview with author, September 2025. "*Matsuri*" refers to a Japanese festival celebrated with dance and music.

[211] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[212] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 140-141.

[213] Kalčik, "Ethnic Foodways in America," 45.

[214] Ken, interview with author, July 2025.

As Ken's surprise illustrates, markers of generation, such as different cultural practices and language abilities, may not be as visible to the shin-Nisei. At least, not immediately, as they are for the shin-Issei. Because while the shin-Issei can notice the difference more quickly due to a language barrier, the shin-Nisei may not necessarily expect it and so, do not make judgements about it.

Although they identify as Japanese American, the shin-Nisei in this study do not consider generation as part of their Japanese American identity. When asked about his thoughts on the term "shin-Nisei," Roger replied, "Maybe it's because I have such a broad understanding of what being a Japanese American is… it doesn't really matter what generation you are."[215] Answering the same question, Ken responded, "I don't think anything of… yeah, I mean, it doesn't mean anything to me," and Jane answered, "I don't really think much of it."[216] Clare recognized that shin-Nisei refers to her, but does not seem to use it as an identity like multigenerational Japanese Americans do. She said, "It was kind of thrown around, and I was like, 'Yeah, I think I fit that group,' right? But never really paid attention to, I guess, the meaning, and I never- I never knew what the 'shin' part was, and that difference."[217]

This lack of identification with generation may be due to a lack of collective experience among the shin-Nisei. Previous studies on the shin-Nisei state that, due to their frequent travels to Japan, they maintain strong ties to their ethnic heritage through culture and language.[218] For example, four out of the six shin-Nisei participants consider themselves bilingual speakers and maintain Japanese language skills through speaking Japanese with their parents. Their

[215] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[216] Ken, interview with author, July 2025; Jane, interview with author, July 2025.

[217] Clare, interview with author, September 2025.

[218] Tsuda, "The Postwar Nisei," 89-90; Kameyama, "Shin-Issei/Shin-Nisei," 398.

bilingualism could become a marker of the shin-Nisei identity since this cultural competence marks one as Japanese, especially when compared to the Yonsei, who may not speak Japanese with the same fluency.[219] Some of the shin-Nisei in this study, however, seem to push back against this characterization.

When asked if he wanted to add anything, Roger said that he was curious about "the dynamics between first- and second-generation Japanese Americans and third, fourth, fifth, sixth generations of Japanese Americans."[220] He explained,

> How intense is the Japanese culture within each generation is like- it falls on the spectrum of an individual, right? 'Cause I know second-generation Americans, Japanese Americans who are not Japanese at all, but also actively try not to be Japanese. And I know fifth-generation Japanese Americans who are trying to kind of- they- they lost some of the Japanese heritage and culture, and they're trying to actively go to Japan, learn some of the culture and stuff like that and bring it back into their lifestyle.[221]

Roger seems to be comparing the shin-Nisei and Gosei, and how "Japanese" they are, suggesting that at times, some Gosei are more connected to their ethnic heritage than the shin-Nisei.

To the shin-Nisei, what does it mean to be Japanese American? Ruth included in her response "there's so many different types of Japanese Americans."[222] She explained,

> There's Japanese Americans that are super FOB-y, there's Japanese Americans that are in the middle ground, but then there's Japanese Americans that are super Americanized… 'cause I know some… second generation Americans that are way more Americanized, like my cousins. And people that are on the opposite spectrum, where they're more Japanese, like my childhood friend.[223]

[219] Toyota, *Intimate Strangers,* 112.

[220] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[221] Roger, interview with author, July 2025.

[222] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

[223] Ruth, interview with author, August 2025.

Roger and Ruth seem to be suggesting that possessing strong ties to Japanese ethnic heritage is a poor marker of the shin-Nisei as a collective group because they each know shin-Nisei who fall on both ends of the "spectrum" between Japanese and American.

Anne seemed to say the same. She explained,

> I might use the term shin-Nisei, but I think it's not as… simple anymore. I think the Issei, Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei… generational terms were very useful for a period of time, but now it's like there are more years of immigration post-World War II than there were pre-, right? It doesn't fall neatly into those categories anymore.[224]

Anne suggests that generational labels are no longer useful terms to describe the shin-Nisei because they cannot be grouped together around shared experiences. When meeting other Japanese Americans, she prefers to "explore each other's family backgrounds, rather than using a specific label."[225]

[224] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[225] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

Conclusion

Anne, who enrolled her children in Japanese language school, has observed changes in attitudes among multigenerational Japanese Americans:

> I see it even now with the J-school, there are people who I knew in middle school, high school who… thought it was weird that I went- that I spoke as much Japanese as I did, and then they're bringing their kids out for J-School now, right? I just couldn't have imagined that, honestly. So, I wonder, I'd want to ask them about what changed. And I've heard some people say, "I got to college, and I met people who spoke Korean and Chinese and Japanese and wished that I had language. Had that ability to speak Japanese, too…"[226]

Moreover, she has made the effort to transmit Japanese American community history and cultural heritage to her children, despite having no familial connection to it herself. She explained,

> We stayed in Oakland Chinatown, we went to San Francisco J-Town, and we went to San Jose J-Town, and I think, you know, I hope that for my kids, it's just exposure to… a Nikkei experience outside of South Bay, too, because again, that whole thing about fish in the water, and you just- you're in the water and you don't feel it.
> But maybe seeing some of these other experiences of Nikkei, or… it's a way to remember and preserve.[227]

As the shin-Nisei in this study move through different life-stages, their priorities regarding issues such as cultural heritage and activism may shift, just as their understanding of their identity may change, as it has for the shin-Issei in Tritia Toyota's research.

This study has limitations due to its small sample size and, as the interviewees suggested, is not necessarily representative of the entire shin-Nisei population. My findings in this study are preliminary but show the potential of examining this growing population. Furthermore, I was unable to interview shin-Nisei who have participated in Japanese American organizations

[226] Anne, interview with author, September 2025.

[227] Anne, interview with author, September 2025. "Nikkei" refers to people of Japanese descent living outside of Japan.

growing up, such as sports leagues, which would have provided insight into their interactions with multigenerational Japanese Americans, allowing for deeper analysis of the topics and themes outlined in this study. However, despite these limits, this research can shed light on how a growing shin-Nisei population constructs their ethnic identities, including factors such as place, language schools, and stereotypes, in an increasingly heterogeneous Japanese American community.

My interviews with the shin-Nisei reveal the ways in which they construct their identities and what those identities mean as they interact with their multicultural social circles and diverse regional influences. Additionally, the presence of the historic Japanese American community and the *chuuzai-in* have had a significant impact on the shin-Nisei's sense of ethnic identity, providing access to ethnic resources such as grocery stores and language school. Although they do not rely on ethnic community institutions as multigenerational Japanese Americans have, the shin-Nisei manage to maintain ties to their ethnic heritage through speaking Japanese at home, ethnic church, and informal social circles. Such ties have been bolstered by the acceptance and accessibility of Japanese and Asian cuisines and pop culture in the mainstream. Attending Japanese language school revealed how, despite living on the periphery of corporate structures, the shin-Nisei are still impacted by the attitudes of race and class brought over from Japan by the *chuuzai-in* and their families. As a result, rather than strengthening their ties to ethnic heritage as their shin-Issei parents hoped, *honshuukou* and Japanese heritage schools tended to reaffirm their American identity. The shin-Nisei also felt included in the American identity because of their multicultural upbringing in the South Bay. Their familiarity with American norms has allowed the shin-Nisei to feel "at home" in the United States and expand their social circles beyond their

ethnic group. The shin-Nisei women confronted mainstream stereotypes about Asian women and conceptualized their American identities according to those expectations.

In negotiating all these factors, they have begun to redefine what it means to be Japanese American, most notably through their lack of identification with generational status and markers, such as place, language fluency, and cultural competence. Their parents, the shin-Issei, tend to notice differences between themselves and the historical Japanese American community in language fluency and cultural practices, such as *Obon*. The shin-Nisei, on the other hand, are not as attuned to such differences. Although they may be perceived as having stronger ties to ethnic heritage, the shin-Nisei in this study disagree with that idea and explain that they know other shin-Nisei who exist in various positions along the spectrum between Japanese and American. For the shin-Nisei, the diversity of their experiences cannot be subsumed under a collective generational label in the way that earlier immigration laws, wartime mass exclusion and confinement, and postwar community rebuilding have made such labels relevant for multigenerational Japanese Americans. As a result, the shin-Nisei do not perceive generation as an important part of their Japanese American identity. This, however, does not completely dismiss the significance of generation. On one hand, it cannot completely fit the wide range of shin-Nisei experiences. But on the other hand, it can still serve as a tool to mark the historical and sociopolitical circumstances of each generation, including the shin-Nisei. Furthermore, generation remains salient and fluid for multigenerational Japanese Americans. How one identifies with generation can change, depending on place and one's relationship with the local Japanese American community, for example.

Likewise, the construction of shin-Nisei identity, including generational labels, can change and shift according to factors such as place. In 2017, Toyota moved their headquarters

from Torrance to Plano, Texas. Such a profound change challenges the continuity of both Torrance and Plano and remakes its social, cultural, and political fabric.[228] Unlike the South Bay, Plano has no history with a local Japanese American community, nor can it claim to be as diverse and multicultural.[229] As a result, this new location for Toyota has a lesser potential to provide access to resources and opportunities, such as food supply chains and Japanese language schools, for the *chuuzai-in* and their families, along with the shin-Issei and shin-Nisei.[230]

My uncle, a white American who made the move from the South Bay to Plano with Toyota, recalled the conditions of Plano when he first arrived: "There was just nothing there." Compared to the South Bay, which had ethnic resources established even before Toyota's settlement there, it took time for the ethnic resources to arrive in Plano. Now, nine years after the move, grocery stores such as Nijiya, along with other Japanese chain restaurants such as CoCo Ichibanya, have been established near the Toyota campus.[231] My uncle said that the quality of the food has improved, too. However, food accounts for only one factor in identity formation. Other

[228] Bohman et al., "More than One Story," 441.

[229] U.S. Census Bureau. 2017: American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Available via American FactFinder. https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP1Y2017.DP05?g=160XX00US4858016.

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Since Toyota's move in 2017, there have been significant shifts in the demographics of Plano, Texas. In 2017, the population was 65.9% white, 9.1% Black, 19.7% Asian, and 14.7% Hispanic. Then in 2024, the population was 47.5% white, 12.6% Black, 24% Asian, and 14.1% Hispanic. For comparison, in 2017, the population in Torrance was 36.1% white, 3.6% Black, 37.3% Asian, and 19.3% Hispanic. The shift in demographics point towards increasing diversity in Plano, which can encourage acceptance and belonging for the shin-Nisei. However, diversity alone does not necessarily mean acceptance; the sociopolitical attitudes of the local resident population play a significant role in creating a sense of belonging for migrants and their families.

[230] Phillips and Robinson, "Reflections on Migration, Community, and Place," 416.

[231] CoCo Ichibanya is a Japan-based chain restaurant serving Japanese curry rice, with locations in the United States, namely California, Hawai'i, and Texas.

factors such as language school, church, and other local community structures still need to be studied.

Lacking a history with a Japanese American community, the local and social conditions of Plano can emphasize difference between the residents and the Japanese migrants and their families, which might discourage feelings of belonging, especially for the second generation. Moreover, it is unlikely that the dynamics between the *chuuzai-in* and the shin-Issei and shin-Nisei would change in Texas. A lack of belonging on the part of the shin-Nisei in Plano might encourage them to form a Japanese American community, including multigenerational Japanese Americans who are Toyota employees making the move with the company, because of a shared need for community-based services, facilities, and resources.[232] It is unknown how many multigenerational Japanese Americans might have relocated to Texas with Toyota, however, because employees such as my Sansei mother and many of my Yonsei friends' parents have chosen to stay in the South Bay; this renders it difficult to determine whether such a community could develop.

Perhaps an entirely "new" Japanese American community could form, made up primarily of shin-Issei, shin-Nisei, and their families. This "new" Japanese American community in Plano would have experiences distinct from those of the historic Japanese American community, especially in the South Bay, which would result in different priorities and concerns significant to the shin-Issei and shin-Nisei.[233] Consequently, they might establish different cultural practices and social structures centered around these collective priorities and concerns.

[232] Phillips and Robinson, "Reflections on Migration, Community, and Place," 414.

[233] Grey and O'Toole, "The Placing of Identity and the Identification of Place," 213.

Alternatively, the shin-Nisei might develop a greater sense of pan-ethnic identity since Collin County, where Plano is located, is home to around 70,000 Asians, or 24% of its population, with people of Indian and Chinese descent constituting the two largest ethnic groups.[234] Further studies of shin-Nisei elsewhere, especially Plano, can expand upon not only the shin-Nisei as a growing population, but the impact of place on identity and how the presence (or absence) of a historic community affects that relationship.

The most rewarding part of this project was the openness and honesty of the shin-Nisei as they shared their experiences. I am extremely honored to have had the opportunity to hear and be entrusted with their stories. I hope this study offers insight into the shin-Nisei population, a growing and understudied group, in the context of Japanese Americans in the South Bay. Although it is a small sample, this study's shin-Nisei participants have revealed the dynamics of class difference, racism, gender, and interracial relations within the Nikkei diaspora, as well as how they may impact this "new" second generation of Japanese Americans. Exploring a non-homogeneous Japanese American community sheds light on what we can learn from the shin-Nisei, their perceptions, and their experiences. The shin-Nisei allow us to reimagine what it means to be Japanese American in the 21st century, potentially creating a more inclusive community and introducing broader definitions of Japanese American identity.

[234] U.S. Census Bureau. 2024: American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Available via American FactFinder, https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP1Y2024.DP05?q=collin+county.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

- Do you have any questions before we begin?
- Can you tell me about your childhood?
    - Where were you born? Where did you grow up?
    - Who were your friends? (If Japanese American, specify if shin-Nisei.)
    - What schools did you attend?
    - Did you play sports? Were you a member of any teams?
    - Did you belong to any youth clubs or other organizations?
    - Did you attend church growing up?
- If you're comfortable, please tell me about your family and what you know of your parents' immigration.
    - What kind of work do your parents do?
    - What kinds of values or ideals did your parents emphasize growing up?
- How did you come to understand who you are? Or in other words, how do you identify yourself and has it changed over the years?
    - Do you ever feel more Japanese or American and in what circumstances?
    - Have you ever lived anywhere else? Has that experience changed the way you see yourself?
    - Have you ever heard of the term shin-Nisei? What do you think of the term?
- What does it mean to be Japanese American?
    - How does your understanding of yourself compare to your prewar contemporaries, such as the Yonsei? What about your parents?
    - Where have you come into contact with or hear about earlier Japanese American narratives? (If needed, clarify Japanese *American*.)
- Do other people see you as American or born in Japan?
    - Why do you think that?
- Tell me about your travels to Japan.
    - How frequently do you go?
    - Where do you go?
    - What do you do there?
    - Why do you go?
- Do you ever feel out place here (in the United States, South Bay, etc.)? What about in Japan?
- What is your experience with Japanese language school? Do you still speak it? At what level?
    - Did you enjoy attending?
    - Do you wish you had studied more?
- What forms of Japanese culture are most popular with you and your friends?
    - How has the popularity/presence of Japanese culture and figures in Southern California (or your life) impacted you?

    - How has it affected your self-perception? Has it shifted/changed since your childhood and if so, how?
- What Japanese customs (daily and holidays) do you do?
    - What customs or cultural practices did you grow up doing?
    - Ex: taking off your shoes in the house, etc.
- Is the preservation of Japanese cultural values and practices (Obon, New Years' traditions) important to you?
- How has the popularity of Japanese cuisine and pop culture (anime, music, etc.) changed since your childhood?
- Is activism important to you? If so, what kinds of issues are important to you?
- What do you know about the model minority myth?
    - Has it impacted your life? If so, in what ways?
- Have you experienced racism or discrimination? In what ways?
- If you were to make a map of the South Bay, what places (restaurants, hangout spots, etc.) would you include?
    - Why are they important to you?
- Who would you consider to be part of your community?
    - Ex: school friends, sports teams, co-workers, neighbors, etc.
- When you were in high school/college, did your parents/family have any expectations or preferences regarding dating?
    - Do you have any expectations for marriage? What about your parents?
    - Are there any pressures to get married by a certain age?
- Before we finish, is there you'd like to say that I didn't ask about?

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