

The Arts of Gentrification: Creativity, Cultural Policy, and Public Space in Kamagasaki

DAVID NOVAK

University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract

In contemporary Japanese cities, nonprofit and grassroots arts organizations are mobilized in threatened urban neighborhoods, where neoliberal forms of creativity are invoked to mitigate social and economic displacement. Gentrification is recognizable across contemporary urban societies, but its practices are contingent on representations of local cultural expression, which have particular ramifications in postindustrial centers of urban Japan. In this paper, I focus on a working-class district of South Osaka known as Kamagasaki, infamous for its longstanding population of day laborers and homeless, in which gentrification has taken a complex route through various projects of cultural representation. Through an ethnographic history of the nonprofit arts space Cocoroom, I contribute to the anthropology of gentrification by focusing on entrepreneurial forms of creativity in local arts organizations, which reveal historical transformations of public space in Japanese urban policy, and highlight the symbolic performances of marginal communities. [Gentrification; Japan; Labor; Cultural Policy; Nonprofit Arts Organizations]

From Karaoke Street to Cocoroom

On a spring day in 2003, you could walk to Festival Gate along Karaoke Street, as I used to do, before both places disappeared. On Sundays, temporary karaoke booths were set up along public passageways throughout Tennoji Park, an island of public space in the concrete heart of South Osaka, which also housed a zoo, gardens, and museum. Long sheets of plexiglass separated the gardens from the ramshackle miniature bars on Karaoke Street, but tourists heard and watched the scene from behind the transparent walls. Over the noisy buzz of countless generators, voices flowed with poetically overwrought songs of lost homes, lost love, and lost time, as small crowds of older men and women gathered on benches or stood by to drink and clap along. I often joined in whenever I passed this unique spot, sharing a beer and a song amongst the blue-tarp-covered walkway colloquially known as *aozora* (blue sky) *karaoke* (Figure 1).

At the time, I was working at a music performance space located in a large entertainment center called Festival Gate, initially constructed to bring middle-class consumers into the rundown entertainment quarters of South Osaka (Figure 2). When no one came to ride the rollercoaster



Figure 1. Karaoke Street. (Photo: David Novak.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



Figure 2. Festival Gate. (Photo: Brad Beattie.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

that snaked around the building, the city offered spaces to nonprofit arts organizations to draw young audiences into the economically challenged district. Volunteers worked to produce cultural programming, including

avant-garde music, multimedia, dance, and poetry, in the mostly abandoned building next to the railway lines of Shin-Imamiya station.

Both Festival Gate and Karaoke Street were structured by their proximity to the small but infamous district of Kamagasaki (“Kama” for short), known for its dense concentration of day laborers. On one side of the tracks, there was the noise music of Bridge, an experimental performance space sponsored by the new progressive cultural policies of the Osaka City Arts Council; on the other, the gritty musical noise of aging workers and homeless people, clashing with the city’s efforts to “revitalize” the entertainment districts of South Osaka. As it turns out, both sites were about to be silenced. In December 2003, the karaoke stalls were removed and destroyed during “repairs and beautification” projects in Tennoji Park. The city claimed (without evidence) that the loud singing caused a downturn in ticket sales at the zoo; then mayor Isomura Takefumi scolded, “You can’t use a public street to have fun and inconvenience others.” Two years later, the arts organizations within Festival Gate were evicted, having failed to reinvigorate the area with avant-garde music, poetry, and dance, and the building was torn down.

*“You can’t use
a public street
to have fun
and inconvenience others”*

Returning a few years later, I observed how policing and redevelopment were slowly transforming public space. In Tennoji Park, sensors and fences popped up where the karaoke stalls once stood, pathways were narrowed with bushy hedges to prevent loitering, and new fees were implemented for public access. An imposing new police station had been built right in the center of Kamagasaki. New visitors soon began to arrive, changing the neighborhood in unpredictable ways. International travelers began to frequent the day laborers’ quarter, attracted by the extremely cheap daily rates (about ten dollars for a single room). Many former “business hotels,” which had served as semi-permanent lodging for local workers, were now advertising themselves as “backpackers’ hostels” with signs in English and Chinese. The neighboring entertainment district, while still half-filled with drunken denizens of tiny dive bars, flowed with new domestic and foreign tourists eager to eat local *kushi-katsu* (sticks of fried food) and *okinomiyaki* (famous Osakan pancakes). In March 2014, the flashy new Abeno Harukas skyscraper at Tennoji Station became Japan’s tallest building, including a Marriott hotel, offices, a museum, and the largest department store in the nation (“a new leading landmark to light the way to a better tomorrow”).¹ Stopping to chat with a group of *ossan* (a colloquial shortening of *ojisan*, meaning “uncle” or “old feller”) at a makeshift used clothing stall, I brought up the differences. “Things have certainly changed since a few years ago,” I ventured. “Oh, sure, I guess so.... over there [*gesturing toward Tennoji*].” But what about the new temporary housing that provided several hundred small rooms for the homeless? “Yeah, they built those. But, Kamagasaki...”—he paused with an ironic grin—“you know ... it’s still a slum.”

Walking further into the battered *shôtengai*, a half-empty covered shopping arcade next to a strip of day laborers’ hotels and cheap bars, I stumbled on a café called Cocoroom, which had been the name of a

poetry workshop and one of the four nonprofit arts organizations once housed in Festival Gate. Peering inside, I recognized the founder Ueda Kanayo, brightly clad in a simple kimono, chatting and serving iced coffee to a couple of older men sitting on bar stools along a cluttered counter. Large sheets of paper covered the walls and ceilings, filled with poems written in bold and simple calligraphy; the shelves lining the walls held a clutter of art catalogues, comic books, and academic texts; Ueda's young daughter watched a cartoon quietly on a laptop computer on the raised tatami mats at the back of the small room (Figure 3). Visitors could try their hand at watercolor painting, pull down a guitar from the wall, read the newspaper, collaborate on a poem, or join in one of the daily family-style dinners for a nominal contribution. Outside the door, a local grocer sold cheap vegetables and basic foods, and used clothes and household goods were marked for sale, echoing the local informal "flea-market" economy (Figure 4). A *plein air* clinic was offered once a month, at which passersby could consult on the spot about health issues with volunteer nurses and dentists.

Chatting with Ueda, I learned that she had relocated Cocoroom to Kamagasaki in 2008, after Festival Gate shut down. When the four nonprofit arts and culture organizations ("arts NPOs") were asked to leave the building, the music club Bridge and the performance group Hibiki closed their doors permanently, while the media arts collective Remo moved south into a different ward. But Ueda decided to remain in the neighborhood, moving to a vacant storefront just across the tracks where she began to rethink Cocoroom's mission. In her view, the city's sponsorship of art projects in Festival Gate had been a failure. But at the same time, she did not want to abandon the possibilities of creativity as a source of social interaction in Kamagasaki. "I realized that no matter



Figure 3. Cocoroom interior circa 2015. (Photo: David Novak.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



Figure 4. Cocoroom exterior circa 2015. (Photo: David Novak.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

how much thought I put into issues regarding the ‘public nature of art,’” she argued, “this will not help [homeless people] with food or clothing. Should I simply resign from work related to art and culture, and just focus on providing assistance to the homeless? I don’t think so. I want to help to resolve the problems of Kamagasaki through my existing work” (Ueda 2013, 94).

In reconsidering the purpose of Cocoroom, Ueda struggled to balance a complex set of concerns. Cocoroom should not function as just another “art space”; rather, its projects would be based in the perspectives of local people and their threatened lifeworlds. This meant fostering new forms of creativity while recognizing the significant and increasing impacts of gentrification in Kamagasaki. At the same time, Ueda told me, she did not want Cocoroom to become a political organization. In the context of activism, she told me:

Someone becomes a spokesman, who analyses things, or makes proposals, offers suggestions and so on. Or else it takes the form of showing anger through riots and things like that. I was interested in a different kind of expression, something that would help express the feelings of individual people as they lead their lives. But you can’t just go to Kamagasaki and say, “What does the expression of your life mean to you?” It would be the same with anyone, if you don’t have the connection that makes someone say, “Oh, well, I’ll talk to *you*, if it’s *you* asking I’ll express myself.” So I thought I had better start by making connections. (Interview, March 2016)

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Cocoroom, she decided, would reopen as a café that could serve as a creative space for use by all people, not just artists, and host regular workshops, classes, performances, and other contexts of collective interaction.

Watching a slow stream of aging and impoverished locals trickle by Cocoroom's door, I admired Ueda's inspiration in taking on the challenge of hosting an open-ended social space in this threatened community. At the same time, I wondered how to characterize Cocoroom's mix of progressive social projects and creative expression. As a self-described "poetry entrepreneur," how did Ueda hope to use the arts to resist gentrification in Kamagasaki, or mitigate the impacts of poverty, age, and unemployment on its displaced population? And how does the story of Cocoroom reflect and respond to the incursions of neoliberal cultural policy, even as its improvisational practices attempted to generate new forms of creative social engagement?

Gentrification and Neoliberal Creativity

In this paper, I describe the emergence of nonprofit arts and culture organizations (hereafter referred to as "arts NPOs") in South Osaka in order to more broadly examine the representational performances of marginal communities in neoliberal procedures of gentrification, and to question the status of cultural expression in state-sponsored projects of "creative cities." Projects to promote local arts have played an ambivalent role in the neoliberal transformation of urban societies, mediating between displaced populations and the coercive forces of economic investment and governmental policy. To represent neighborhood life as a collaborative context of "creativity" is a multifarious project, shot through with political symbolism. In harnessing particular areas of the city as sites of creative expression, arts NPOs can also tacitly open up threatened neighborhoods to coercions of policing and development. How do arts organizations like Cocoroom orient themselves to Kamagasaki as a site in which to improvise new forms of expressive culture? What are the effects of their interventions into the lifecycle of a dying labor force? And how do their efforts intersect with policy-based ideologies of "creativity" that work to rationalize entrepreneurial projects of gentrification?

*Gentrification
is a global
"scale-making"
project*

It is increasingly clear that gentrification is a global "scale-making" project (Tsing 2000) that cuts across contemporary urban societies and reorganizes neoliberal governmentality as a biopolitical rubric of "revitalization" (Foucault 1997; Brown 2015). In major cities throughout the world, gentrification exhibits common discourses and practices of social displacement and economic revaluation. Widely adopted ideological vocabularies of "renewal" and "improvement" are used to "reconstruct" or "repurpose" particular neighborhoods as "historically valuable" sites with "culturally creative" populations. However, while gentrification has become a ubiquitous force of urban development, it is equally important to recognize that it is a heterogeneous process, which generates new political ecologies in relation to specific cultural and historical

circumstances. For example, Potuoğlu-Cook (2006) describes how belly dance has become a marked praxis of secular urban neoliberalism in contemporary Istanbul: dance bars mark certain neighborhoods as platforms for developing secular political economies, tourism, and speculative projects that hinge on the ambivalent recognition (and sometimes “preservation”) of “authentic” local culture. Everyday contexts of art and performance crystallize in unofficial cultural policies, which undergird lived experiences of neoliberal subjectivity and expose aspirational infrastructures in which “urban and cultural gentrification mutually constitute one another” (Potuoğlu-Cook 2006, 635).

The growing focus on creative labor in global cities reveals gentrification as a political rationality that exceeds the economic goals of capitalist expansion. Neoliberalism has become a generalized mode of living, which in turn undergirds the logics of expression, community, and resistance that define the cultural horizons of urban space. Here I draw from Wendy Brown’s rethinking of Foucault’s governmentality, which sheds light on the ways in which citizens and civic spaces are reconfigured as contemporary market subjects. Neoliberal societies, Brown argues, “inaugurate a new ‘economization’ of heretofore noneconomic spheres and endeavors,” in which “both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value ... through practices of entrepreneurialism, self investment, and/or attracting investors” (Brown 2015, 22). In this context, “artistic expression”—like “sharing” and other seemingly transcendent human values—“becomes a market niche ... creating a value of ‘social responsibility,’ which must itself become entrepreneurialized” (Brown 2015, 27). Gentrification creates a demand for creative “responsibilization” of neighborhoods—a moral burden that falls squarely in the realm of entrepreneurial arts/culture projects, which respond with “innovative” flexibilities of financing and labor (crowdfunding, internships, collaborative partner/parent sponsorships) and increasingly fluid uses of public and private space (“pop-ups,” shared installations, restoring/repurposing of industrial sites).

In this context, it is easy to see how “creativity” has taken on such an outsized role in the social programs of neoliberal infrastructure. Global cities increasingly seek cultural capital by instituting new versions of Charles Landry’s (2000) “creative city” and Richard Florida’s (2002) “creative class” policies, which measure the economic potential of neighborhood development with sociocultural “lifestyle” metrics aimed at high concentrations of “creatives” (including artists and musicians, as well as LGBTQ-identified people and others high on what Florida terms the “bohemian index”). Marking “creative” spaces in the city means identifying civic resources specific to particular neighborhoods: the diverse ecologies of socioeconomic and racial difference, the material qualities of buildings in an industrial landscape, and the independent values of informal local micro-economies. “Creative city” policies capitalize on these local particularities in ways that instrumentalize urban identities in a now-classic staging of economic revaluation:

1. “Creatives” develop flexible spaces for art and performance (often exploiting lax enforcement of noise regulations).
2. The area is rebranded as an affordable “live/work” zone and an aesthetic/commercial destination based in a funky mix of industrial chic, ethnic populations, and cutting-edge fashion.
3. Coffee spots, bike stores, bookshops, and handmade clothing shops give way to tech outposts and corporate chains.
4. Property values rise and rents go up, previous residents are almost fully displaced, and the “creatives” move on to the next frontier.

In gentrifying cities, the recognition of “local neighborhood culture” is both resisted and instrumentalized as a force of governance through arts and culture policy. The most cynical readings describe this process as “art-washing,” in which city governments tacitly support gentrification by promoting creative works to encourage social expression while overlooking the violent effects of redevelopment on existing populations.² Social interaction is one of many “projects of management” operated by citizen-entrepreneurs—sometimes designated as “artpreneurs”—tasked with the transmigration of creativity into the metrics of economic development (Harvie 2013). This pivot to socially engaged public art policy is (at least) bidirectional. For urban policy, it is an attempt to include the cultural values of existing communities in processes of economic redevelopment; for the art world, it represents a “social turn” away from isolated aesthetics toward participatory and collaborative goals and support of an extant public sphere (Jackson 2011).

George Yúdice (2003) shows further how visual art, music, and poetry conjoin with more quotidian forms of social expression that are transformed into a neoliberal “expediency of culture,” which normalizes marginal places and identities to better utilize their political force across broad state-driven projects. The “social imperative to perform” leads cities to create special arts districts (such as Festival Gate) which put pressure on existing residents, even while representing their interventions as social reinvestments in civic life. But as Yúdice notes, the political currency of neighborhood culture “depends on the performative possibilities holding in different societies ... there is little to be gained by deploying identity or disidentity if there is no juridical or other institutional uptake to transform rights claims into material changes” (2003, 77–78). As such, the stakes of socially engaged arts in Kamagasaki continue to be bound up with a population immobilized by poverty, aging, and the impacts of global labor market deregulations. For homeless and disenfranchised workers to be recognized as market subjects, they had to be recast as “creatives” through interventions of cultural policy.

No one could mistake Cocoroom for an engine of corporate investment in South Osaka, or its organizers as masterminds of the contemporary market. At the same time, its “social turn” takes on neoliberal logics of governance, which locate cultural capital by maintaining the unlikely “creativity” of collaborations with an ambivalent and destabilized community.

While nonprofit organizations provide social mediation for residents, they do not usually attempt to directly confront or alter urban policy, instead providing an open-ended context of “public expression.” The danger of this approach is that grassroots arts projects are folded into flexible networks of cultural capital by generating dialogues of community “voice” that symbolically empower threatened neighborhoods even as they plant the seeds of radical economic instability. Support for public arts and performance scaffolds to scaffold new stages of economic redevelopment, as unofficial cultural histories are revised to align with neighborhood rebranding. The precarious infrastructure for “socially engaged art” helps to project a temporary “creative” horizon, which continually advances across the city to frame newly emergent frontiers of entrepreneurial “revitalization.”

In the midst of the ongoing contradictions of these aspirational social politics, it is crucial to recognize the nimble and sophisticated tactics of local activists, who work constantly to recognize and resist the absorption of their projects into corporate or governmental agendas. Ueda and her coworkers are not unaware of the risks as they negotiate the problems of individualization and entrepreneurialism within the art world, while attempting to generate a site of social interaction that resists profitability, philanthropic interests, and the state-driven attribution of NPO status. Yet their artful improvisations with social engagement are perhaps the best evidence of the metacultural conditions of the neoliberal political imaginary.

In the remainder of this paper, I extend an ethnographic critique of the arts of gentrification by outlining the development of informal cultural policies in South Osaka in the wake of the “economic miracle” in postwar Japan. I position the contested geography of the Kamagasaki neighborhood within changing perspectives on urban planning from the 1960s through the recessionary 1990s and 2000s. Arts and culture organizations illustrate the ambivalence around local culture that developed during this period, when cultural policy emerged to combat the effects of increasing socioeconomic fragmentation. Some of the actors I describe here have themselves developed a strong critical perspective on the coercive modes of creative collaboration that call into being, and then speak for, local communities. Studies of gentrification call for close ethnographic attention to arts-based social projects that reveal how cultural policy is practiced in critical urban spaces, and how political logics of independence and resistance can harden into neoliberal subjectivity. I flesh out these questions with a concise history of the arts NPO Cocoroom, describing its ongoing efforts to generate community dialogue beyond cultural policy and improvise social performance outside of the “creative classes.”

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From Kamagasaki to Festival Gate

Kamagasaki is the unofficial name for a half-mile-square area in the downtown ward of Nishinari-ku, historically packed with temporary shelters, lodging houses (*doya*), and cheap bars. This name

has been contested at least since the 1960s, when the Osaka city government renamed the area as “Airin” (loving neighborhood).³ Business associations branded the neighborhood as “Shin-Imamiya” after the closest Japan Railways station (described in pamphlets as “a perfect base for budget tourists” and “a conveniently located public transportation hub”). Policymakers labeled the subdistrict “Haginochaya” after the local elementary school in a desperate appeal to families (even though the school has been closed for years due to a lack of enrolled students). But although this name does not appear on any official maps of Osaka, Kamagasaki remains a powerful metonym for its longstanding resident population of homeless, unemployed, and itinerant workers.

The twentieth-century history of Kamagasaki outlines Japan’s post-war transition from collective national labor pools to an embrace of neoliberal capitalism and flexible work. The day laborer market (*yoseba*) was initially located in the northern part of the city in 1903, built to house workers for the 5th National Industrial Expo (Nakagawa 2010). These temporary lodgings were torn down and reassembled on farmlands in the southern village of Imamiya; the area was heavily bombed in the Asia-Pacific War, but ramshackle buildings popped up to accommodate reconstruction workers, including many Koreans brought forcibly to Japan during the war (Figure 5). Young men were recruited in force for the 1970 Osaka World’s Fair, a major showcase for postwar Japan’s

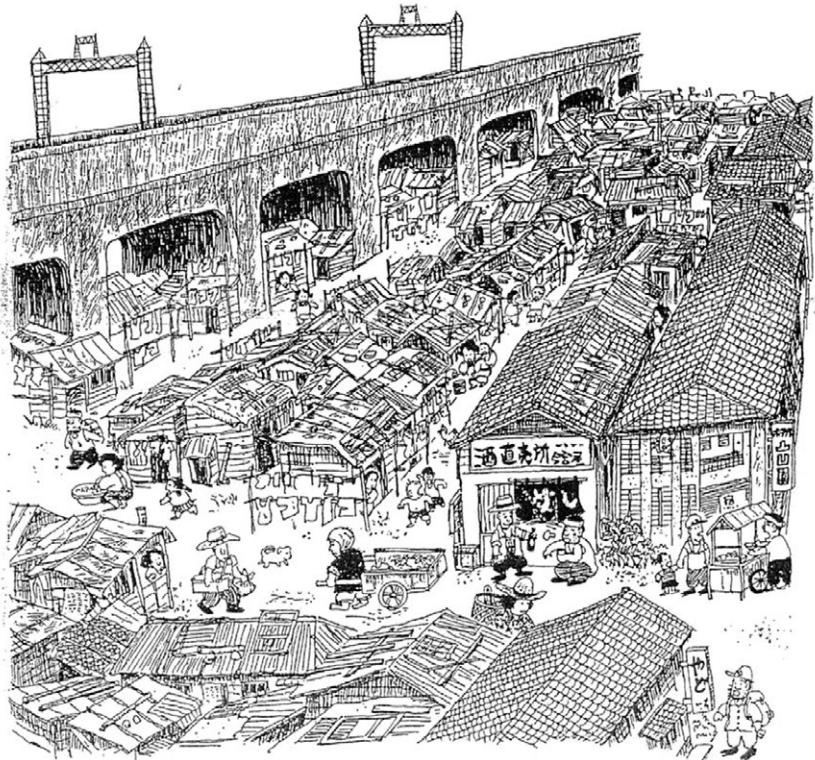


Figure 5. Drawing of Kamagasaki circa the 1950s. (Illustration: Arimura Sen.)

“economic miracle,” as over thirty thousand day laborers flooded into a tiny 0.6-square-kilometer area for the building of the fairgrounds (Haraguchi 2011). When the Expo shut its doors, the workers stayed on, growing older as the economy fell into recession and labor became increasingly mechanized.

In its persistence as a derelict economic zone, Kamagasaki challenges the mythology of postwar Japan’s vaunted lifetime employment models, exposes national fantasies of a classless and ethnically homogeneous society, and reveals the socioeconomic violence behind Japan’s postwar miracle. The area overflows with jobless and homeless older men, including many undocumented immigrants from Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, as well as other historically marginalized groups with limited access to housing for reasons of poverty, discrimination, illness, or disability (Figure 6).⁴ By the end of the century, over ten thousand *nojukusha* (“rough sleepers”) took shelter in *aozoramura* (“blue sky villages”) named for the blue tarps used to construct temporary housing at the edges of parks, train stations, and public walkways. In this, Kamagasaki joins other *doyagai* (worker’s towns) across Japan transitioning from active labor pools to zones of abject social abandonment.⁵ Cheap and undocumented housing opportunities attract ex-prisoners, disabled people, unemployed youth, and others who have difficulty finding legal lodgings. Criminal culture is deeply entrenched, with *yakuza* running drug and prostitution rings, as well as unregistered camps (*ninpudashi*) for illegal and/or underpaid work. Kamagasaki became nationally infamous for anti-police riots and labor union actions beginning in the 1960s; in December 1998, residents clashed with police and set fire to local trains after seventy people were evicted from their tent homes (Matsuzawa 1988). These uprisings—including a



Figure 6. Homeless men waiting for shelter outside the Airin Center, 2009. (Photo: Fukuda Shiho.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

*Kamagasaki
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of modern
Japanese
society*

2008 street protest during the G8 summit—helped make Kamagasaki a flashpoint for class-conscious political activism (Nonomura 2000).

As a symbol of decaying working-class culture, then, Kamagasaki represents a living critique of the neoliberal transformations of modern Japanese society. It was with a close eye on this fraught symbolism that Osaka City developed the Shinsekai Arts Park Project in 2002, which proposed to revitalize Festival Gate with four nonprofit arts organizations dedicated to experimental music (Bridge), modern dance (Hibiki), media art (Remo), and literature (Cocoroom), interspersed with a wrestling museum, a cat-petting café, a spa, and the iconic rollercoaster that wrapped around the building. Visitors could attend a show by minimalist electronic musicians from Sweden, take in a workshop about the aesthetics of televisual surveillance, or participate in a collective modern dance improvisation, all of which were augmented by a shaking sensation every few minutes as the nearly empty rollercoaster whizzed by.

Festival Gate stood distinctly apart from the historical populism of South Osaka's downtown (*Minami*), an area renowned for more quotidian pleasures.⁶ On one flank lay the flophouses of Kamagasaki and the red-light sex work district of Tobita Shinchi, where about one hundred "restaurants" continue to operate as brothels in open violation of anti-prostitution laws. On the other was Shinsekai ("New World"), a planned pleasure district developed for the 1903 National Industrial Expo, with an amusement area (originally named Luna Park after the famous Coney Island site) and a beloved copy of the Eiffel Tower (known as Tsutenkaku). At the turn of the millennium, Shinsekai barely chugged along with a gritty mix of attractions that ran the gamut from *fugu* (blowfish) and *kushi-katsu* (fried food skewers) restaurants, to small video arcades and cafés, to low-budget porn theaters and tiny, cramped karaoke bars. If it had been intended as a creative doorway to South Osaka, Festival Gate felt more like a fortress towering over the desolate neighborhood. An underground subway exited directly into the building through elevators located in its basement, and those visitors who did venture outside would encounter sparsely populated streets dotted with old men drinking from "one-cup" sake glasses or staggering toward nearby flophouses.

Festival Gate was the latest attempt to reboot the downtown area, reducing the effects of social displacement while retaining the cultural and economic value of its working-class *bonhomie*. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, Osaka adopted a "knowledge-value"-based policy proposed by economist (and Expo '70 planner) Sakaiya Taichi, who argued that the city should become a service node in Japan's growing "information society" (*johoka shakai*) (Sakai and Haraguchi 2004). Revitalization meant building pavilions and business parks for conferences, international fairs, and cultural festivals, instituting a vicious cycle of bringing in temporary laborers and then "cleaning the streets" of abandoned homeless workers.⁷ Under Sakaiya's influence, Osaka generated public works to build community infrastructure, dovetailing with the widespread national cultural

policy of *machizukuri* (“town-building”) (Bestor 1989). From 1990 to the end of the millennium, *machizukuri* projects doubled the number of municipal cultural facilities and generated countless nonprofit support groups (Watanabe 2007; Kobayashi 2012, 24).⁸

However, the rise of social interventions also heavily impacted structures of recognition for existing residents of unincorporated neighborhoods. For example, the citizen-organized Kamagasaki Community Regeneration Forum developed supportive housing projects by leasing rooms from former worker hostels and then subletting the rooms to homeless workers (Inada 2004). In 2000, a six-hundred-bed facility was constructed, followed by other facilities where activists and social workers help residents find permanent housing. But creating supportive housing also meant establishing categories of official residency, which increased forced removals by dividing the existing community into three status brackets: those who “want to work but can’t find it,” those who “need medical/welfare support,” and those who “refuse socialization” (Haraguchi 2008). *Nojukusha* (“rough sleepers”) in the last category were accused of taking over public space for their own purposes and forced to leave the area.⁹

It was in the context of these changes that Osaka City developed the Arts and Cultural Action Plan that funded the four NPOs in Festival Gate, shifting from broader social inclusion programs to focus on public education, entertainment, and other creative activities as a mode of “future-directed cultural investment” (Nakagawa 2010). The project was orchestrated under a patently neoliberal platform called the Designated Management System (Shitei Kanrisha Seido) through which local governments could designate third-party organizations to manage public facilities, but the policy ignored the fatal “contradiction of regional governments first financing the construction of such extravagant facilities but then being unwilling to cover operational expenses” for noncommercial arts organizations (Kobayashi 2012, 20). The organizations in Festival Gate were initially offered ten-year leases, but in less than two years, the Arts and Culture Action Plan was withdrawn, the property managers went bankrupt, and the city put the building up for auction.

Festival Gate’s failure revealed the internal contestations between divergent cultural policies, each aiming to revitalize South Osaka, and each targeting different subjects of “culture.” Just one year after the adoption of the Arts and Cultural Action Plan in 2001, the city introduced a new program called the Culture Appreciation Action Plan. The Arts and Cultural Action Plan had stressed professional arts performance to build a culture of local “creatives”; the Culture Appreciation Action Plan, on the other hand, focused on the revitalization of consumer facilities for overseas tourists and “general citizens.” The new policy was developed through the City Council, while the Arts and Cultural Action Plan was proposed by a subcommittee and executed by artist-organizers, who were tasked with the impossible job of quantifying the success of their “creative work” in annual reports to the city.

In this precarious context—as cities improvise with cultural policy by implementing, altering, and then withdrawing support for community-based projects—how might cultural arts organizations reconsider their ongoing status as mediators of neoliberal revitalization? How does a neighborhood culture generate affordances for a diverse spectrum of identities and interests? How long do creative collaborations last, and how do they weather the changes of a gentrifying city? I explore these questions further by returning to Cocoroom—“The Room full of Voice, Words, and Hearts”—and the projects initiated by its founder Ueda Kanayo, which encapsulate the contradictory environment for the development of public arts in Kamagasaki.¹⁰

The Everyday Poetics of Cocoroom

When Ueda initially founded Cocoroom in Festival Gate in 2002, it was intended as a poetry workshop to connect poets and writers and produce an emergent dialogue about the public status of literature. But when Cocoroom reopened in 2008 in Kamagasaki, it was as an “infoshop/café.” The different reference points of these terms captures something of Cocoroom’s mixing of alternative social politics into everyday life. “Infoshop” invokes a transnational political underground, nodding to the anarchist collectives and squats that emerged in European and North American punk rock networks since the 1980s.¹¹ Infoshops are physical gathering places for activists and nodes in a *samizdat* network for alternative media, political art, literature and DIY (do-it-yourself) social projects. Meanwhile, the term “café” proposes to satisfy everyday needs of socialization, nourishment, and leisure. At the edges of gentrification, Cocoroom aimed for a collaborative transformation of public space. It incorporated creative work alongside the collective production of political consciousness, even as it foregrounded the satisfaction of daily needs, interpersonal exchange, and social interaction.

One of Ueda’s goals was to connect with visitors who might not consider Kamagasaki safe. Indeed, walking in this area can be intimidating even for local Osakans, who often avoid passing through when frequenting nearby entertainments. To mitigate this fear, volunteers at Cocoroom lead informal tours of Kamagasaki for domestic and overseas visitors, with routes covering local shrines, public bathhouses, flea markets, the labor market, and casual spots for socializing and drinking. Cocoroom prints a walking tour map of the area with text in Chinese, English, Spanish, and Vietnamese, which points visitors to unique local performance spots such as Naritaya, an open-air *tachinomiya* (standing bar) where jazz combos play on a regular basis. Part of the goal was to turn the increasing force of tourism toward interacting with Kamagasaki residents, rather than heading directly to entertainment spots across the tracks in Shinsekai. But Ueda did not seek only to “raise consciousness”

of gentrification by bringing young people into Kamagasaki. Rather, she hoped to connect homeless workers with other socially unassimilated people—disabled persons, queer-identified youth, precarious flexible workers known as “freeters,” unemployed “dropouts” or NEETS (“Not in Education, Employment or Training”)—in order to recognize their shared conditions of isolation, expendability, and marginalization.¹²

The mix of visitors to the café fostered unique and spontaneous performances by groups like the Kamaboko (Fishcake) Band, made up of several older laborers who narrated Kamagasaki from their own perspective.¹³ Band leader Inoue Noburo would occasionally get drunk at Cocoroom to let off steam, until “one day Seki-san [a volunteer employee] was practicing guitar and asked him ‘You want to sing too?’” (Akai 2010). Seki transformed Noburo’s hard-hitting insults (“Shuddup ya jerk! What you running your mouth for?”) into lyrics that captured the gritty challenges of daily life, like “What the Hell?” (Nan de ya nen?):

I drifted down to Kama
 At first I couldn’t even go outside
 Streets full of trash, men pissing, glaring back at me
 What the hell? Use the damn public toilet!

No matter how much I drink, it’s just no fun
 Spend my money on sake and get no kicks from it
 Talking to myself, crying over my own complaints
 What the hell? Why am I so dumb?

Life—it’s just this *stuff*
 Get old and hurt your back
 There’s never any work any more
 Scared of fights now, they say I’m turning mellow
 What the hell? Why’s there no work? I want to work!

Tomorrow, I’ll do something too
 Anything will do, if it makes someone happy
 Even me, I can give it a try
 What the hell? Don’t know why, but I believe it

“What the
 hell? Why’s
 there no
 work? I want
 to work!”

As Cocoroom attempted to balance the poetics of everyday sociality with symbolic performances of neighborhood life, the staff remained aware of complex internal contradictions and ethical challenges. Volunteer staff member Endo Tomoaki was concerned that public arts projects can unwittingly damage the coherence of neighborhoods. While the Festival Gate NPOs had intended to cultivate community interactions, the building became emblematic of the growing privatization of public space, which tamped down on the open-ended creativity of assemblages such as Karaoke Street. “Art projects are easy to endorse,” he told me, but without sensitive integration would become “a step toward something else”:

Most of the time they start with a simple idea: “Let’s make this neighborhood more beautiful!” We recognize that this position is dangerous, so we’re thinking about how to change that idea so we can live together. In many cases, it’s better not to try to “improve” things, but instead to get involved with people. You have to make art that requires the presence of local people, that couldn’t exist without the unique people that live around here. (Interview, August 2015)

Ueda criticized public art installations as signals of a kinder, gentler gentrification (“gentlefication,” following the neologism of social entrepreneur Tony Goldman). Although public artworks are often presented as politically neutral projects of general beautification, their execution can conceal alternate agendas. One recent example in Kamagasaki is the mural painted on the overpass of the Nankai railway line, across from the Airin Center where day laborers gather to seek work. The painting was commissioned by a group of local businesses and funded by the Osaka City government and the Nankai railway. “[The organizers] got in touch with me,” Ueda remembered, “and I said I thought they shouldn’t just have an artist come in and paint something . . . I suggested having a workshop on gentrification; all of a sudden they dropped me from the mailing list, and one day the painting was just there.” Ueda speculates that local property owners sought the mural project to discourage existing informal uses of the space and prevent workers at the Airin Center from using the overpass as temporary storage: “They don’t want bags piled up against the railway overpass because of the risk of fire. But they can’t just haul people’s things away, so they had the painting done in hopes that it would get the men to move their bags on their own.”

In contrast to these city-sponsored “dialogues,” Ueda’s goal is not to speak, but to listen. Cocoroom, she said, does not rely on the symbolic productions of artworks, but creates an open space for the unrecognized discourses of *kikoenai koe*: the silenced (or perhaps more accurately, “unlistened to”) voices of Kamagasaki. Rather than interpret and represent other people, Ueda argued, the most important thing is to listen sincerely and produce moments of emotional interconnection. In a neighborhood where locals are silenced as public nuisances, she said, the work of clearing a place to sit and listen to one another is an improvisatory form of social mediation. “Within the shop, there are arguments and cursing, but also loud shouts of praise . . . every day is like an impromptu performance” that suddenly changes the space into a “creative workshop” (interview, July 2013).

At Cocoroom, unemployed workers interviewed one another about their lives, illiterate men slowly learned to write calligraphy and recite poetry, earnest college students tolerated their wisecracks and learned local history over shared meals. The empty storefront directly across the street housed the Kaman! (Come On!) Media Center, which was filled with used clothing and basic housing items and featured a large monitor facing the street. Sometimes the monitor displayed art and poetry created in Cocoroom, or images of Kamagasaki from decades past, but much

*to sit and
listen to one
another is an
improvisatory
form of social
mediation*

of the time it was connected to a computer as a public Internet hub. The screen was commandeered by passersby to play music videos of a current hit or remembered melody from times past: “At any time,” Ueda said, “the shopping street might suddenly be immersed in song.”

But public collaborations were just as often met with failure. Kaman! director Hamada Mai remembered an occasion when a local man drunkenly canvassed passersby on the street to collectively author a suicide-prevention song:

He suddenly showed up and started handing passersby a piece of paper saying “Please write some lyrics about suicide” ... but it wasn’t much fun for the people he was trying to talk to! The best poet isn’t going to be able to write anything decent with a paper shoved at them that way, especially with such a delicate subject. The people who had actually lost someone close to suicide must have felt pretty uncomfortable, but they did write something. I was really annoyed when he walked in later and boasted, “Look how many lyrics I got!” How could he handle such a delicate problem that way? And in front of Kaman, as if we were cooperating with him! “You shouldn’t do it that way,” I said, and he snapped back “But you said you’d cooperate.” (Hamada 2010)

Ueda admitted that many attempts to solve such conflicts end in deadlock, and related other stories of “unfillable gaps” between her own views and the expressions of café visitors: men punching volunteers, stealing money, and causing damage. Hard-won relationships were regularly lost when men who had slowly opened up to communication became infirm or just disappeared without a trace.

As a way of developing a more consistent platform for creative collaborations, Ueda began the Kamagasaki Arts University or Kama Gei, which from 2012 has held over one hundred free workshops and lectures attended by over fifteen hundred residents in the area.¹⁴ Staffed by faculty from Osaka University and other volunteers, Kama Gei circulated beyond Cocoroom to bring courses to shelters and soup kitchens. These nomadic projects came into the everyday spaces of Kamagasaki residents, but also brought them into contact with other places and people around the city. Projects such as *Drifting Kama Gei* brought local men to area schools; their everyday clothes and objects were displayed in an open “lab café” organized by faculty at the Center for the Study of Communication and Design at Osaka University. One of the University’s first efforts was the Musubi (Riceball) troupe, in which a class of elderly unemployed men learned *kami shibai*, a nostalgic form of improvised storytelling using paper drawings that had been popular in the early postwar. After years of isolation in welfare housing, the formerly homeless men found ways to reconnect through their performances across the city, on television, and even in a festival in London.¹⁵

As Cocoroom forged connections with cultural agencies and foundations, both within and outside of Japan, its collaborations and crowdfunded projects sometimes blurred the lines between community

expression and orchestrated intervention. For example, in 2015, Ueda worked with the London-based charity arts group Streetwise Opera to produce a performance entitled *Kama O!Pera*, sponsored by the British Council, in which homeless men sang and acted with Cocoroom volunteers and professional performers to tell stories of life in Kamagasaki.¹⁶ But the project tilted the creative balance of collaboration toward the organizers; Ueda wrote the libretto for *Kama O!pera* herself, while the British director Matt Peacock developed the music and choreography. Streetwise Opera is currently seeking funding for another collaboration with Cocoroom in 2020 through a new group called With One Voice, which “seeks to build the arts and homelessness sector globally through exchanges in policy and practice” by working with sponsors in Olympic host cities (e.g., Tokyo 2020).¹⁷

Even though such events are billed as community-based collective projects, advocates inevitably drift to the center of the representational focus. As one of the only local figures to have consistently mounted cultural performances over the past decade, Ueda has become the de facto spokesperson for Kamagasaki. Alongside her efforts to foreground the local community, she is regularly invited to personally represent the area and its arts as a curator and speaker in exhibitions and conferences. Cocoroom was featured as an installation at the 2014 Yokohama Triennale, with workshops on Kamagasaki, art, and poetry produced by residents on display. Cocoroom’s neighborhood walking tours led to a video feature on the website of *The Economist*, in which Ueda led viewers through Osaka’s food market to sample *takoyaki* (octopus balls) and other local treats; in 2014, she received the New Face award from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; in 2015, she was a guest speaker at the international scholarly conference Socially Engaged Art in Japan at the University of Washington.

In the neo-liberal city, public interaction is itself an improvised and contingent project

In the neoliberal city, every context of public interaction is itself an improvised and contingent project. Ueda struggles to maintain her mission in the changing economic zone of South Osaka as the number of visitors to Cocoroom continues to decrease with the aging population. She briefly took on the management of an eighty-person public housing apartment building to raise funds and bring a Cocoroom-style intervention to the residence hall with “a space for expression” in its common room, but the work was too complicated and consuming to maintain. In 2016, the café lost its lease, and Ueda moved a few blocks further into the shopping arcade to reopen as Cocoroom Café and Garden Guesthouse, which she described as a kind of tourist *doya*, borrowing the local term used to describe workers’ flophouses. Within the colorfully designed dormitories and affordable single rooms, she hoped to generate new encounters between locals and international visitors, who collectively use the café to “become better connected” by helping to clean up and prepare meals. While “meeting different kinds of people may sometimes be

stressful,” a new bilingual website explained, “we believe you can make your life more meaningful with each encounter.”¹⁸

The move to a guesthouse model was motivated by increasing financial stress, compounded by Ueda’s exhaustion with the difficult job of maintaining day-to-day operations. Cocoroom had relied on a support structure evenly split between minimal revenues from sales, grants, and donations from cash-strapped local customers and depended on the fluctuating efforts of volunteer labor and internships. In order to become more “self-sustaining,” Ueda found an investor willing to support Cocoroom’s integration into the growing International Guesthouse Area Association, and began hiring long-term staff. She also registered Cocoroom with an agency that provides public support programs for disabled people via short-term employment, and on a given day several people with disabilities might work at the guesthouse. However, she also discovered that many disabled regulars weren’t enrolled in these systems, and said that it is usually too difficult to facilitate their integration.

As of our most recent interview in 2017, the guesthouse model had not yet delivered a financial payoff, and Cocoroom was “in the red and struggling.” Ueda has run through the gamut of local grants from “employment assistance, community business, welfare, healthcare, and urban development,” and admits “it is difficult to apply for the same grant over and over again” (Ueda 2017). At the same time, Kama Gei has begun to develop projects around Japan, offering courses in Fukushima, Hachinohe, Tottori, and other depopulated areas, and has held two exhibitions in Taiwan, including workshops on how to operate a nonprofit arts group without institutional support. Ueda holds out hope to remain in Kamagasaki and poetically writes “Through Many Buildings, I have Arrived Here Today to Find Myself...”¹⁹

Creativity and Its Critique

As “creative cities” policies continue to align with targeted development projects, attention to the space-shaping contestations amongst local communities and grassroots agents is crucial to the recognition of an emergent neoliberal urban sphere (Appadurai 2006; Choy 2011; Jackson 2011; Low 2016; Peterson 2010). By bringing new attention to transitional sites like Cocoroom, urban anthropologists can reveal the lived subjectivities that flesh out socioeconomic analyses of gentrification. One goal here is to unpack the improvisational roles of informal arts projects in carrying out institutional cultural policies that reframe local identity as a neoliberal form of creativity, a social art is conceived as paradoxically “resistant” to its own generative conditions. But the critique of gentrification should not be reduced to the recognizably symbolic signs, figures, and events that aestheticize political resistance:

the spectacular protest actions, artworks and songs circulated by iconic artists and musicians, or the nostalgic narratives of loss and decline that eulogize the closures of local businesses and community sites. In this paper, I have argued instead for a broad ethnographic attention to the performance of everyday social life in historically marginalized neighborhoods, which reveals the constitutive presence of particular small histories and allows us to glimpse the individual subjects of gentrification, even as they continually transform or vanish.

The trajectory of Cocoroom reflects the ways in which creativity, independence, and flexible self-organization are framed by a neoliberal ethos of entrepreneurial bootstrapping that folds back into the logics of gentrification it attempts to resist. These ongoing contestations encompass the shifting territories of urban policy as they become imbricated into the social improvisations of nonprofit arts organizations. Such groups stress expressive performance, self-narration, and cross-cultural interactions as their central goals, and present dialogic intersubjectivity as a core value of social difference. But to do so, they present their resistance as an entrepreneurial negotiation with a “larger” economic ontology, which mobilizes and integrates human capital into “best practices” of competitive, rationalized exchange.

In focusing on the meta-conditions of neoliberal creativity, I want to keep sight of the sophisticated tactics with which Ueda works the edges of gentrification at Cocoroom—imagining a site of interaction that refuses profitability, philanthropic interests, and the state-driven attribution of NPO status—and highlight her nuanced recognition of local cultural presence. There are very few possibilities for imagining any kind of regeneration in Kamagasaki, and with each passing day, the historical postwar social structure fades further. The day labor markets have long been crippled by a globalized economy, and the only available work removes residents to distant locations, including, horribly, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Since 2011, elderly laborers are quietly recruited to decommission radioactive materials within the contamination zone along the devastated Tohoku coast, and signs are posted at the Airin Center to teach workers how to put on protective clothing and masks before the journey. And, of course, there is also the inevitable impact of old age on the constituency of social space as the laborer population gets older and becomes increasingly isolated to their residences, or to hospitals. As neighborhoods struggle with these impacts, listening may offer an emergent form of socially minded practice. The goal here is not necessarily to permanently change an urban environment, but to mitigate the dehumanizing effects of neoliberal “revitalizations” by recognizing the liveliness of existing ways of being.

Part of the reason that Cocoroom remains an unstable place is that the creativities of its local lives fail to be registered as such, but instead persist (for now) as uninvited guests at the bleeding edge of social integration. Their survival is itself an open question, which, as Ueda describes, can take the form of art:

it may seem like art is trying to solve regional problems. However, actions that simply propel us towards the future—which to me is the essence of art—are not necessarily aimed at solving problems. Art is less about problem solving and more about discovering what is being treated as a problem . . . This is why I want to take seriously the everyday practice of questioning. That is, I take art to be a *technique of surviving*. (Ueda 2017)

“Art is less
about problem
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problem”

But even survival is an open question, and a condition that is always subject to reevaluation. Can something like the spontaneous, raw liveliness of the Karaoke Street parties truly survive in an entrepreneurial, organized, project-based format like Cocoroom? If art is a technique of surviving, to what material is this emergent *techné* applied in Kamagasaki? As Cocoroom is, in Ueda’s words, “pretending to be a café” in order to house the deeper revelations of “daily life theater,” it also reflects the global turn of contemporary politics toward embodied performances of public assembly; the arts of occupying space in the modern city.²⁰ If this means remaining as an unassimilated problem, rather than a fully-fledged place of culture, Cocoroom’s failures might embody the art of non-integration, if not always resistance, in a gentrifying city.

Notes

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¹“Abeno Harukas,” *Abeno Harukas*, accessed June 30, 2016, <https://www.abenoharukas-300.jp/en/>.

²For example, see recent protests against art spaces and coffee shops in the gentrifying neighborhood of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles (Alianza Contra Artwashing n.d.; Nazaryan 2017). Similar cases in cities worldwide are described in the *Guardian* online column Gentrified World, dedicated exclusively to global effects of gentrification.

³This term is used for all official buildings, such as the Airin Labor Welfare Center, which is the central dispatching station, shelter, and gathering place for workers in the area.

⁴One important subgroup is the *buraku* minority, associated with uncleanness for their historical labor in leather and meat production; for a recent ethnographic study, see Hankins (2014). A recent study shows that life expectancy in Kamagasaki was the lowest in Japan, with the rate of tuberculosis exceeding the national average by a factor of ten,

and about two hundred workers per year dying on the streets (Arimura n.d.; Mizûchi 2003).

⁵On other day laborer districts in urban Japan, including San'ya in Tokyo, Kotobuki in Yokohama, as well as Kamagasaki, see Aoki (2017), Fowler (1996), Gill (2000, 2001), Haraguchi (2011), Hasegawa (2006), Stevens (2007), and the *Yoseba* journal of contemporary Japanese studies.

⁶A close comparison in the United States would be New Orleans, also known as a rootsy “good-time” city that hosts many major national conferences; one South Osaka entertainment mogul tellingly praised the Shinsekai area as “Osaka’s Deep South” (Onishi 2008).

⁷The World Rose Convention, for example, precipitated 250 forced evictions in 2006, including the karaoke stalls in Tennoji Park.

⁸The 1998 NPO *hōjin* (Law to Promote Specific Nonprofit Activities) enabled volunteers to form legally registered NPOs as subcontractors of governmental projects, generating new “social enterprises” (*shakaiteki kigyō*) that act “in parallel to the government ... to realize social entrepreneurship within local communities” (Ogawa 2014, 53).

⁹Beginning in 2007, Osaka City began to abolish residency permits of day laborers who registered addresses outside of the new supportive housing projects. In response, over three thousand residents registered their dwellings as “Kamagasaki Liberation Hall” under the threat of new expulsions.

¹⁰The “co”s of Cocoroom derive from the first syllable (*ko*) of the three words in this longer name: *koe* (voice), *kotoba* (word), and *kokoro* (heart).

¹¹See, for example, Juris (2008) on the informational networks of the anti-globalization movement in Europe and North America in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

¹²On gender and sexuality differences in Japan, see for example Robertson (1998); on disability in contemporary Japan, Karen Nakamura’s (2013) *A Disability of the Soul* is invaluable.

¹³The word *kamaboko* means fishcake but here is a punning combination of “Kama” for Kamagasaki, and the sound effect “boko” for bashing or bubbling.

¹⁴Kamagasaki Geijutsu Daigaku is abbreviated as Kama Gei; sometimes it is called “Aozora” (Blue Sky) University in reference to the blue tarps used as housing material for many of its homeless “students.”

¹⁵For further information on the Musubi troupe, see *Urban Research Plaza GCOE Report 14* (2010) and Nakagawa (2010).

¹⁶A short video produced by the British Council featuring the Streetwise Opera organization can be viewed here: <https://www.british-council.jp/en/programmes/arts/music-education/training-feb-2015>.

¹⁷Olympic cities are archetypal sites for megaprojects of urban revitalization, combining funding for local development projects and social outreach with the wholesale displacement of entire neighborhoods and communities (Gold and Gold 2008).

¹⁸Cocoroom website, accessed May 20, 2016, [http://cocoyadoya.org/\(site discontinued\)](http://cocoyadoya.org/(site discontinued)).

¹⁹Cocoroom website, accessed May 20, 2016, [http://cocoyadoya.org/\(site discontinued\)](http://cocoyadoya.org/(site discontinued)).

²⁰See, for example, Harvie (2013) and Butler (2015).

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