

Little Tokyo: History, Memory, and Community Change

a report compiled by CTSJ 257: "Critical Praxis: Voice, Memory and Community Transformation,"
Occidental College
Spring 2012



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Executive Summary

“Meanings of Community in Little Tokyo” is a report created through collaboration with the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) – a community development corporation – and a class in the Department of Critical Theory and Social Justice (CTSJ) at Occidental College – CTSJ: 257: Critical Praxis: Voice, Memory, and Community Transformation. Through a series of sixteen interviews with business owners, residents, and individuals from community organizations, this research aims to paint a picture of the Little Tokyo community’s collective voice. In light of continuing and future redevelopment of the area, developing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and views of one of Little Tokyo’s most vital assets – its people – is a piece of a larger effort to document the landscape of the neighborhood at the outset of major changes that are set to occur.

Little Tokyo is a small, yet deeply complex community, and the wide variety of opinions expressed by interview subjects in the report reflect this. Each interview reveals a different perception of the community’s major stakeholders, its needs, its significance, and how it should evolve in the future. However, what ties these narratives together is a genuine sense of loyalty and care for protecting Little Tokyo so that it can exist for the next generations to live, work, and play in for years to come. In order to provide a comprehensive account of the community’s voice, this report is organized into five thematic sections – history and memory, working and living in Little Tokyo, participation in the life of the community, perception of changes in Little Tokyo, and visions for the future – which are then concluded by an analysis section.

The first section of this report expresses how Little Tokyo has a very complex history that is not well known to many both within and outside of the community. Those who are familiar with the history however, tend to emphasize Little Tokyo’s historical connection to the Japanese American experience, the impact of the economy and development, the importance of local institutions, as well as the overall idea of community. It is also a widely held view that more should learn about Little

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Tokyo's history and the reasons why and how it was created.

Moving into the present day, the experience of working and living in Little Tokyo is detailed next. Interviews from community members from diverse walks of life highlight how daily routines differ considerably based on peoples' roles in Little Tokyo, and these schedules also tend to change depending on the day of the week and the time of day. One main similarity between them all however, is the fact that working and living in Little Tokyo entails interacting with a variety of different people, businesses, and organizations everyday. Since being a part of the daily life of Little Tokyo holds a lot of meaning for each person interviewed, many also express their hope for being able to communicate that significance to visitors.

Perspectives on participation in the life of the Little Tokyo community are described in the third section of this report. While many interview subjects are involved in collective community efforts such as the Little Tokyo Community Council and the Business Association, their enthusiasm for community participation is not held by all. However, most do agree on the necessity for all sectors of the community to participate, and so the kind of individuals and organizations who do and do not participate, as well as the amount of effort they put in, is a matter of much debate.

The fourth section focuses on perceptions of change in Little Tokyo. In the past five to ten years, Little Tokyo has gone through many physical and demographic changes. Community members particularly note a rise in Little Tokyo's number of high-rent apartments, its developing nightlife scene, an increased sense of safety, and more variety in businesses. The community has also gone through much change recently as residents are becoming more ethnically and economically diverse, and the amount of participation coming from certain sectors, particularly the youth, is also starting to increase.

Finally, the fifth section of this report illustrates the varied visions for the future of Little Tokyo held by community members. Many interview subjects emphasize the belief that supporting small businesses and the arts are important aspects

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of sustaining Little Tokyo into the future. In addition, Little Tokyo's future identity in relationship to the Japanese American community is a particularly critical topic of discussion because while many stress the importance of Little Tokyo remaining a safe space for the Japanese American community, others put more focus towards developing the area into a multicultural space. How the future sees these two dynamics connect or come into conflict will play a key role in determining the future direction of Little Tokyo.

This report concludes with an analysis of the major themes that run throughout each of the five main sections of this report. Little Tokyo is currently at an important crossroads where outside development and internal change are forcing community stakeholders to contemplate how Little Tokyo can move forward into the future in such a way that also preserves its long-developed and complex identity. Balancing respect for its history with acceptance of change is especially complicated by the fact that Little Tokyo's diverse stakeholders bring perspectives to the table that do not always meet in agreement. As a broad collective however, the Little Tokyo community grants great value to multiculturalism, preservation of history, youth involvement, openness to visitors, positivity, diversity, and community symbiosis.

Introduction

“Meanings of Community in Little Tokyo” reports on a collaborative effort between Evelyn Yoshimura, Community Organizing Director at the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), and a class in the Department of Critical Theory and Social Justice (CTSJ) at Occidental College. LTSC is a community development corporation that works to empower the community and provide critical necessities such as affordable housing services. CTSJ is an interdisciplinary department that provides students with critical analytic tools, theories, and methods, centered on social justice. This collaboration was facilitated by the College’s Center for Community-Based Learning (CCBL) due to mutual interests and concerns about changes the community faces as the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) moves forward with plans to build a Regional Connector in Little Tokyo. The class, “Critical Praxis: Voice, Memory and Community Transformation,” brings together theory and practice as students learn about Little Tokyo through academic readings and interactions with the community.



For the project, nine students, from frosh to seniors, interviewed sixteen community members based on a list compiled by Evelyn Yoshimura. Interviewees included business owners (local and chain), residents (market-rate and affordable

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housing), and individuals who work in a variety of non-profit community organizations (including service, arts, and religious organizations). This report maintains anonymity of the interviewees. Our objective has been to develop an understanding of the changes the community is experiencing and what Little Tokyo means to community members. Here,



were port on the themes and insights from the interviews. As people who are coming from outside the community of Little Tokyo, we attempt to reflect what we have heard back to the community. As we acknowledge that what we hear is shaped by our own experiences and positions in society, we strive to avoid taking ownership over what the interviewees say.

The report is organized around five major themes. First, the report illuminates interviewees' comments on Little Tokyo's history. Second, it reflects on their experiences of working and living in the community. The report then looks at how interviewees participate in the life of Little Tokyo. Next, interviewees discuss changes they have observed in the neighborhood. In the last theme, community members explain their visions of the future for Little Tokyo. Finally, we collect and reflect on the memories, experiences, and voices that interviewees have shared with us in order to contribute to the image of Little Tokyo as future conversations continue to shape it. We hope this project, and the effort given by Little Tokyo community members, will spark and contribute to these further conversations.

History and Memory



Within Little Tokyo there are multiple, overlapping layers of history. The ways these histories are learned, perceived and expressed is different for every group and individual. From the perspective of different generations; Japanese and non-Japanese persons; businesses large and small, local and corporate; non-profits and other community organizations, Little Tokyo's history is rich and complex. Such diverse insights produce both complementary and conflicting accounts, but everything adds to the community's history as a whole. In the end, Little Tokyo and its complexity has come to represent an important and unique social space.

A few dominant themes found through the interviews about Little Tokyo's history are the importance of Japanese American history; the impact of economic issues, development and change; the importance of local businesses, organizations, and religious institutions; and the overall idea of community. Many interviewees express a sense of attraction and/or belonging to Little Tokyo as opposed to other Japanese communities. As one interviewee states, there seems to be a "special community dynamic that IS Little Tokyo," that has held the space together during difficult times.

Most interviewees discuss events that have taken place after internment. One interviewee states that "Little Tokyo was the main meeting point for the Japanese American community so it made sense to come back . . . [as] members always retained ties to Little Tokyo." However, one interviewee notes that deteriorated conditions meant that Little Tokyo gained a "reputation [as] a bad place" which "hurt the community because people stopped coming." Yet community members came together and "instilled a sense of pride in the Japanese American youth who had never really thought of this place [Little Tokyo] as their community . . . but . . . realized how important it was to them." With the rise of community organizations, members

History and Memory



of the community came together to claim the space that had developed so much meaning for them. While most of Little Tokyo has gone under considerable development and change, much initiative has been taken to preserve its history and the heart of Little Tokyo, especially with the building of the Japanese American National Museum, public art monuments and the preservation of First Street as a National Historic District. Another aspect of the community that is highly important to all interviewees is the continuation of local “mom and pop shops,” Japanese restaurants with their “comfort food,” and religious institutions. These features of Little Tokyo are just as important to the preservation of the community and its history as the actual physical space that they occupy.

Despite the depth and importance of the past, interviewees raise concerns that not enough people know Little Tokyo’s history or have interest in increasing their knowledge about it. Interviewees state that most of the history they know was found through research and participation; some feel they should know more. The interviewees who do know a lot about Little Tokyo’s history are typically involved in some kind of community organization, but each individual’s views are quite unique. Interviewees hold a range of opinions on topics such as the early years of community development, the role of Japanese corporations and their investments in the commu-

History and Memory

nity, as well as the flow of different cultures in and out of the area. For example, some are opposed to non-Japanese businesses, but others, including “youth[, are] more open to multiculturalism” and non-Japanese experiences in Little Tokyo. There is greater collective agreement in terms of the desire to keep larger chain stores out of the historic community. Everyone agrees that change is good and inevitable, but how that change happens and what is lost, transformed or incorporated into the community is always a complex topic of dispute and negotiation. Despite these differences, most feel loyalty to the area and believe that “it is important for people to know how and why Little Tokyo was formed.” Without its history, there would not really be a Little Tokyo; interviewees indicate that it is vital to continue to share and understand both the “positives and the negatives.”



Key Points

- Knowledge of history is important for the continued existence and meaning of Little Tokyo
- Despite its importance, sometimes not enough is known or shared about the community's history
- Majority understand change is necessary and inevitable All hope that as change happens, community history continues to be respected
- All hope that as change happens, community history continues to be respected
- Connect future to the past

Working and Living in Little Tokyo



Depending on whom you ask, a typical day in Little Tokyo looks very different but always involves interacting with others. Interviewees bring to light various intra-group contrasts, including daily pace, amount of community interaction, and sentiment towards Little Tokyo, as well as other differences. Most of the information we collected reflects the daily agenda for community organizations, residents, and two types of businesses (those open during regular business hours and those with longer hours) but does not necessarily reflect the lives of community members in general, although many of the contributors have multiple roles as members of the Little Tokyo community.

According to the nine people involved in community organizations (religious, cultural, youth and social service) we interviewed, their daily pattern can be unpredictable because of its fast pace and the variety and quantity of activities that go on. Many subjects express involvement in a multitude of meetings and opportunities to network on a daily basis. As one interviewee explains, he meets with his staff, community members, and business people as well as writing emails, organizing, and

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working on simultaneous projects. While many subjects express that there is a certain amount of routine built into their schedules, others are constantly faced by new tasks posed by the needs of the people whom they serve, including visitors and community members. Every day holds new and old challenges so that the “typical day” for the community organizations is a day that is always rewarding but is unique from the previous and from the next.

As explained earlier, many involved in community organizations must work with other businesses and community members in order to most effectively meet their own goals as well as common goals they have with other community entities. While this is a central aspect of organizations, one new youth organization stands out by saying that their ties to the community did not happen automatically. They say that just because they are a Japanese American organization did not mean that everyone in Little Tokyo accepted them when they formed. Overall, though, most express positive opinions about the community of Little Tokyo and their organizations’ relationship with it. One interviewee who works in a social service organization describes a common sentiment about working in Little Tokyo: “[There is a] good sense of community, when you go to work you feel like you are going to your ‘second family’ because everyone is working towards one goal.”

Similarly, for businesses that are open mostly in the daytime, working in Little Tokyo means that they, their employees and their customers are a part of a comfortable daily pattern. Everyone who is a part of that pattern, including employees from neighboring businesses and even the mailman, chat throughout the day sharing local news; there is constant community bonded mostly through oral interaction. For these types of businesses, working in Little Tokyo provides a safe and familiar community atmosphere mirroring that expressed by most community organizers. As one eatery owner explains, by developing relationships with other businesses all parties involved will benefit and if they are all thriving then his establishment will also be thriving.

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In contrast to the regularity of businesses primarily open during the day, the speed for businesses that are open more often and for longer hours varies from day to night and within the week. These businesses see different types of clients. One coffee shop owner within the community states, “There are three specific groups of customers: office workers, weekenders and the dinner crowd.” A restaurant owner gives another example of the changing appearances of the neighborhood. On a typi-



cal Friday, according to him, lunch time is populated by mostly businessmen and businesswomen from the downtown area who usually do not come by except during their break, but at night there are many more people who are younger and who come to Little Tokyo for fun. The coffee shop owner previously mentioned says that the Little Tokyo Roots Association is one of the leading organizations within the community to promote nightlife. Another resident agrees, saying that their

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project, the “Tuesday Night Café[,] is a space that is helping revitalize Little Tokyo.”

While most community members express positive feelings about Little Tokyo, some offer areas for improvement. One interviewee who works in a social service organization comments on the community trying to “get rid of the smoke shops and other stores with mature products” in order to improve conditions for children in the community. Another believes that it is “not a friendly place for young people,” while others comment on the continuing struggle to reduce crime. Yet the individual who works for improvement for families also comments that while (nearby) “Skid Row is a huge challenge in the community, it is [our] neighbor, and they are a part of the Little Tokyo community,” pointing attention to the need to improve conditions for all. This expression of the need to connect to others is reflected by another interviewee who states, “Little Tokyo cannot survive by itself. It needs to reach out and create larger connections.” One resident of the community comments, “Some of the tenants [in my complex] don’t even know about the organizations and programs within Little Tokyo and greater downtown LA,” while another comments that it’s really difficult to be a resident because there are certain amenities that aren’t available in the immediate area.

Still, other interviewees find what they need and opportunities to make significant connections within Little Tokyo. One business owner and resident explains that her family had settled in Little Tokyo originally because they didn’t have much choice, but now she has sentimental reasons for living in Little Tokyo and keeping her business where it has been for over 60 years. Many residents express a similar emotional link to Little Tokyo. Two religious leaders comment that their congregations’ places of worship have not changed since their return to Little Tokyo because most people feel a link to their own personal history as well as a link to the community. One interviewee says that Little Tokyo is like a “Japan away from Japan,” with a strong sense of togetherness: “You are able to come here and get things you can’t get anywhere else.” Another says, “I love the fact there are some places you can buy

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Japanese things. Like a kimono shop and you can even buy a Japanese saw.” People within the community appreciate not only Japanese products, but also the unique environment of the community. As one business owner and resident explains, “[Little Tokyo is a] safe, clean, quiet, pleasant place to live. It’s really cute here.” Most residents believe that Little Tokyo is a safe and friendly neighborhood. A resident and an employee of a community service organization says, “There is a good sense of community.” She goes to work and explains that on an ordinary day she goes out, walks, and talks to business owners because for her it is “nice to keep that friendship going.”

Interviewees express the desire for Little Tokyo to be a place infused with meaning for community members and visitors, not simply somewhere that people treat “like a food menu,” picking items from the community without understanding their significance. Another interviewee states, “It must be a state of mind not just a location. There needs to be a conversation about what Little Tokyo is so that people are really aware of it. It should be about the visitors and the business people who know what Little Tokyo is and being able to take something meaningful away from



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their experience within Little Tokyo.” A business owner expresses a concern about the long-term viability of the businesses that are at the heart of the community: “We do bring in a lot of people and tourists. But you always wonder about the economic realities as far as supply and demand: Do the people who come here want to patronize our small businesses? Or do they want to come look at all the Japanese-y things and go to the Johnny Rockets?” Another interviewee mirrors concerns about what Little Tokyo is in the eyes of those who visit: “People need to realize this is not their personal Asian fantasy land! I mean (Little Tokyo) just looks like any other part of the city, and so it’s so funny to see people trying to construct something that isn’t quite here.” An individual who works in a social service organization brings the concerns back to the importance of maintaining the qualities of the community: “Little Tokyo has been around for 125 years and we don’t want it to disappear because it is a part of our history, it is a part of our heritage and legacy, a lot of people care about the community, and want to see it continue for another 125 years.”

Key Points

- Different schedules. Range and contrasts in routines
- Organizations: Fast pace, busy. Challenges but overall sense of community
- Businesses: Comfortable pattern / Busy, with different kinds of people
- Residents: Room for improvement, but many have strong sentimental ties
- Establishing lasting meaning for visitors and community members

Participation in the Life of the Community



The sixteen interviews within this study provide a wide range of perspectives on community participation. Many members contribute to the well-being of Little Tokyo through the Little Tokyo Service Center, the Little Tokyo Community Council, sports, religious organizations and youth programs. One community member says of the Community Council, “[It] pulls people together and provides a space to talk and build relationships.” A noted restaurant owner on First Street participates via the Little Tokyo Business Association, with ties to the now-defunct Community Redevelopment Agency.

Multiple spiritual leaders within the community feel that participation is at a good level. In general, the interviews conducted with these leaders provide some of the best information because of their unique relationships to the community. One religious leader within the community who is also a member of the Community Council feels his organization is very active within the community and has done a lot to boost levels of participation. He is a supporter of Kizuna, a group of Little Tokyo youth who work with the older generation to increase youth involvement.

Participation in the Life of the Community

Another spiritual leader says, “We have been engaged from the very beginning [conversations about] the Regional Connector and in other things as well like the High Speed rail.” Both spiritual leaders mention work to build stronger relationships between Korean and Japanese residents, particularly among older generations. Spiritual organizations within the community are highly active with its inner workings from youth to the elderly, as well as involvement with businesses.



Youth involvement is a focal point of discussion within the community. Many members feel there is a lack of involvement, but cannot figure out why, while others have created programs to fill the void of youth involvement. One

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community member has dedicated her career to youth involvement programs and has started many youth-specific summer programs. Programs do exist for the youth to participate in, despite the relatively low level of activity. A prominent business owner within the community is adamant about keeping youth programs for



Japanese American youth active. A leader within the Community Council feels that more youth participation is necessary, and that youth bring important skills to the community. A spiritual leader within the community takes it further in saying that it is necessary to bridge the gap between the generations and is not as concerned about a lack of involvement. In general, the interviewees agree youth need to be represented, but one comments on negative interactions that occur between generations when youth act entitled, alienating older members of the community. This interviewee sees Kizuna as offering a positive way for youth to become involved. He says, “It’s been really gratifying to see Kizuna . . . They are getting the message out to the youth to come back whether it’s a theater performance, or a festival, or a concert. We are really happy that we are actually passing on the baton to them and that there’s a hope, not only a hope but almost a confidence that Little Tokyo will survive after we are done.”

In a somewhat more critical voice, a First Street business owner who participates in the Little Tokyo Business Association feels that community participation is somewhat lacking. This view is not singular: another noted community member and owner of a small business says, “[The community has a] strong sense of com-

Participation in the Life of the Community

munity in pockets,” meaning that the community consists of tight-knit groups and small networks, but these are disconnected from each other. The First Street business owner shares this view. He feels participation is low because community members are reluctant to make major changes within the community or because they are not able to work through disagreements..

The perception of levels of participation do vary. A spiritual leader believes that businesses and restaurants cooperate and participate together well. This leader says that what is “neat about Little Tokyo” is that for the most part, all the businesses cooperate with each other. Another leader thinks the opposite, commenting that he doesn’t hear enough from businesses, despite seeking their input. A business owner from Japan says, “Participating within the community is not a duty, but a cause.” This quote exemplifies the attitude towards participation in Little Tokyo. Participation is clearly very important to many members in all walks of life. For this reason participation is a focal point and a point of differing perspectives within the community.

Key Points

- Little Tokyo Community Council is the most popular route of participation
- Businesses participate via the Little Tokyo Business Association
- Variety of perspectives on participation
- Youth participation is an important focal point
- Religious organizations provide programs and other ways to participate
- High rent apartments/condos raise important issues
- Many more visitors and a growing nightlife
- Little Tokyo has become safer and more diverse
- Need for more parking space
- Opinions revolving around the Regional Connector are varied with uncertainty about how it will affect Little Tokyo

Perceptions of Change in Little Tokyo



Over the course of the interview process, many of the participants had much to say when it came to the changes that Little Tokyo has gone through over the past five to ten years. Many of the interviewees express a change in the types of residential buildings that have been coming into Little Tokyo, including apartments and condominiums. One interviewee notes “A significant change is the new residences. They are nice apartments.” A few interviewees point out the increase in high-rent apartments in the area. One interviewee observes other changes that accompany this growth: “With all this housing, and a lot of the market rate housing, you have to be like a young professional. They moved in . . . that’s been a big change. . . . They were not here before. Before, downtown and little Tokyo were mostly old folks, and poor folks.” With the new type of living accommodations in Little Tokyo, community members are seeing new types of people moving into Little Tokyo, especially young

Perceptions of Change in Little Tokyo

people. It is not only the residential side of Little Tokyo that has seen a change in the prices of buildings, however. One interviewee talks about how the increase of price on property in Little Tokyo is also affecting businesses: “Even in just my time here, we’ve lost a lot of businesses. Just like a month ago, my favorite sandwich place just closed down because their rents were raised and they couldn’t afford it.” The Little Tokyo community is currently seeing a change in the prices, with effects for those living and working there.

Interviewees note that Little Tokyo has become much livelier and vibrant over the past five to ten years. Little Tokyo had not always been seen this way: “It used to feel really dead. It just seemed sometimes sketchy, not alive.” Many of the interviewees said this has changed a lot. Little Tokyo had previously gone through a period where it lacked visitors, but now there are people walking the streets at all times. “People are coming into Little Tokyo whether in the day time or even night time. I say ten years ago I might be here at 7 o’clock or 8 o’clock and I’d look outside and there’d be no cars parked on the street . . . but now I go out at 9 o’clock and people are still looking for parking spaces. . . . This means that people are coming into Little Tokyo.” As the community becomes more inviting, many of the interviewees comment on the night life that Little Tokyo has gained. One states, “The nightlife has gotten fairly major. Little Tokyo has gotten really vibrant as a destination.” The more-welcoming Little Tokyo is becoming is causing for an increase in foot traffic. Although most members of the Little Tokyo community that were interviewed see this as a good thing, a couple of interviewees believe that as Little Tokyo becomes trendier, it is more likely to become a tourist trap.

A majority of the interviewees mention that as Little Tokyo increases in popularity, the community is becoming safer. During the period when Little Tokyo did not have many visitors, the amount of crime was much higher than it is now. A business owner notes, “We used to have cars vandalized or broken into; we used to have complete security systems because of break-ins, but over the past five years we

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haven't had any attempted break-ins . . . crime has really tapered off." Most interviewees feel that the reason for the decrease in the amount of crime over the past five to ten years results from Little Tokyo becoming an inviting and exciting place. Crime has been brought down because now there are more people walking the streets of Little Tokyo at all hours. This has allowed for Little Tokyo to become a safer place than it previously had been.

Little Tokyo is also becoming a more diverse place. One interviewee explains that Little Tokyo used to consist of mainly Japanese people, but now there are many Chinese, Korean, Latino, and Caucasian members of the community. Some interviewees notice that there are many new businesses coming into Little Tokyo that are serving different kinds of foods, which is also adding to the diversity of the community. Another factor that people are noticing is the increase in new kinds of residents

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into the community. Most of the interviewees do not mind the increase of diversity in Little Tokyo. Most share the same mind set as this interviewee: “The world is changing, so is Little Tokyo. A lot more mixing going on and you can’t help it. We can’t just close the door and say ‘Japanese only.’” However, a few interviewees express a fear that the Japanese history and culture that exists within Little Tokyo will go away as it becomes more diverse. And because of this, they are skeptical of the diversity that is coming into Little Tokyo.

A main issue that many of the interviewees have noticed that has been emerging in Little Tokyo is parking. One interviewee expresses that Little Tokyo used to consist of many more parking structures than it does now. Five interviewees mention parking as a major issue in the neighborhood. They raise the question: if there is nowhere to park, how are people supposed to visit Little Tokyo? Many business owners believe that parking is a major issue because if people not from the community want to come to Little Tokyo to eat or spend money in any way, they need places to park. Although this is currently a huge issue for some, a few interviewees express no concern for parking whatsoever, focusing on other issues for the community.

The issue of parking is currently connected to concerns about the construction of the MTA’s Regional Connector in Little Tokyo. Amongst the interviewees, there are many different views when it comes to the Regional Connector. A majority of the interviewees express that they believe that the period of time when construction is happening will have negative effects on the Little Tokyo community. Although that might be the case, they feel that in the long run, the Regional Connector will be good for the community and that the community will be glad that it is there. Other interviewees believe that the Regional Connector will have more negative effects on the community. They believe that development around the Regional Connector may lead to changes in the character of Little Tokyo. Other interviewees are indifferent to the Regional Connector or do not really know what it is. However, almost all interviewees who are aware and care about the Regional Connector are concerned about

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an increase in traffic and congestion on streets during the construction period.

As noted in the section above on “Participation,” youth involvement is on the minds of many people within the community. Five of the interviewees think that over the past five to ten years Little Tokyo has been lacking youth participation within the community. However, three of the interviewees believe that this is changing and that the youth are beginning to get involved. These community members think that this is happening because they believe that Little Tokyo has become a much more youth friendly place. They think that younger generations are realizing



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the importance of Little Tokyo and are therefore becoming involved within the community. However, a majority of the interviewees think that Little Tokyo is lacking almost all youth participation, “It’s a very interesting dilemma when you talk about who are the leaders of Little Tokyo right now and I would probably bet on it that there is no one under fifty.” Many people feel this is the case because the youth are not taking Little Tokyo as their community and also as a piece of their own identity. Although there are conflicting thoughts on whether or not the youth are involved within Little Tokyo, almost all the interviewees agree that youth participation within Little Tokyo is important. Little Tokyo is currently making an effort to get the youth involved through organizations like Kizuna. The community sees the need for new ideas and thoughts that younger generations would bring to Little Tokyo. Some of the interviewees also realize that Little Tokyo consists mainly of older people. They therefore understand the importance of youth involvement because when the older generations pass, it will be up to the younger generations to preserve Little Tokyo. It is because of this that many of the concerns of community members revolve around the youth and ways to get the youth more involved.

Key Points

- Little Tokyo has gained many high rent apartments
- Little Tokyo now has many visitors and a nightlife
- Little Tokyo has become safer
- The Little Tokyo community has become much more diverse
- Parking has become a major issue in Little Tokyo
- There are different perspectives on the Regional Connector and how it will affect Little Tokyo
- The participation of the youth has become a source of a lot of discussions in Little Tokyo

Visions for the Future



In the collected interviews, there is a strong trend supporting small businesses for the future viability of Little Tokyo. Almost all of the interviewees express a dislike of corporate-owned or chain businesses. One individual says that corporate-owned stores were “what killed small-town America” and another states that they “literally are taking people’s money and not giving back or contributing.” The residents and community organizations we interviewed support smaller businesses as well, stating that they give Little Tokyo its character; one interviewee states that the businesses are the “heart of Little Tokyo.” In support of the businesses, several interviewees express a vision of Little Tokyo with more parking, with concerns about the disruption

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and loss of parking during the construction of the MTA Regional Connector. One business owner says that “Parking is already tough in Little Tokyo and a lot of spots will be lost with expansion by MTA, so hopefully they will do something to create a sort of shuttle system.”

Three interviewees see arts and other cultural forms as integral to the community of Little Tokyo. Not only do they feel that the arts draw in customers who then patronize businesses, but they also feel that developing Little Tokyo as an arts district would supply a resource currently lacking in Los Angeles. A community arts leader sees interconnections between the arts and the sustainability of the neighborhood, stating, “As an artist I would like to see more art forms . . . because art tends to bring forward-thinking people. . . . Art [also] brings in a lot of money.” Because of the Japanese American National Museum, the Geffen Contemporary, East West Players, Historic First Street, and the Tuesday Night Cafe, Little Tokyo already has a strong arts foundation to build on in the future.

Another strong pattern in the collected interviews is a vision of Little Tokyo as a central haven for Japanese Americans. A religious leader says that he “really see[s] the need for a central place where everyone can regard it as their home in Little Tokyo. . . . We are hoping that the younger generations will buy into that, otherwise the Japanese American community will pretty much disappear with the blending into the general population.” Almost all the interviewees emphasize the need to bring youth into the community and express their concerns about youth preserving the community of Little Tokyo as well as Japanese heritage. The desire for more youth participation is shared even by business owners, one of whom talked about bringing in activities such as a bowling alley to attract kids. One movement that is well supported by business, community organizations, and residents alike is the upcoming Budokan or recreation center project. Although there are some comments of resistance to the Budokan, most of the interviewees think it is a great step forward to draw in youth. One business owner says in support of the Budokan, “I know that

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they are building an athletic center here. I think that will bring a lot of families here and a stronger sense of community.” There are also several calls by community organizations and residents for places for community members and guests to hang out and where people would feel safe and relaxed. There are also repeated calls for green spaces and gardens, as well as a better library.

Interviewees interested in continuing to improve the quality of life in Little Tokyo include both small business owners and those interested in a more residential Little Tokyo, who talk about encouraging families to move into the community. Several interviewees, including business owners, emphasize the need to clean up Little Tokyo and to make it a more safe space for customers and for youth. One interviewee, who works in a social service agency, envisions Little Tokyo as a safe space for youth around downtown Los Angeles. She says that she sees Little Tokyo as “more of a community . . . not too much based on big businesses, . . . more of a safe place for the families, a safe place for youth.” However, this vision of residential Little Tokyo could raise challenges for the community because bringing in more amenities for residents, such as a grocery store, could create an influx of chain stores that goes against other visions of Little Tokyo. A small business owner’s vision of maintaining the character of the community entails making sure that Little Tokyo is known as an enjoyable, safe space that visitors would leave with “a smile.”

The interviewees also hope for better community integration and communication. Several individuals voice a hope for better communication between the different stakeholders of Little Tokyo. One community organization leader expresses concern about who is currently considered a stakeholder, stating that “There are various degrees of ownership” in Little Tokyo that are unsustainable in the future. These interviewees see organizations such as the non-profits and the Little Tokyo Community Council as leading the way towards a more integrated and well-represented future.

There is some ambivalence among the interviewees regarding how best to

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preserve Little Tokyo's Japanese heritage. The interviewees are evenly divided on the issue of maintaining Little Tokyo's Japanese character in the future versus creating a more multicultural community space. Several of the community organizations and businesses feel very strongly that Japanese heritage is the heart of Little Tokyo and that emphasizing this heritage would bring more attention both to the businesses and to the rich history of Little Tokyo. Religious organizations especially feel that Japanese Americans need a central place they can feel at home and accepted. One religious leader illustrates this view, saying he sees Little Tokyo as "A central location for Japanese Americans to be able to identify with and . . .

to access. Even as it gets smaller, as long as the spirit is intact, I think at least for the next couple of generations it will be okay." Many feel that the history of Little Tokyo should be preserved, and especially community activities such as Nisei Week.

Offering another view, a good number of interviewees feel that "dilution" of Little Tokyo's Japanese heritage is inevitable. They propose a multicultural community that "can be for everybody" and emphasize the fact that Little Tokyo has always been a richly diverse community. One community organization leader says that she wants "to see Little Tokyo as more complex-- as a very layered place, with a really rich history." She continues, saying that "Little Tokyo should never be exclusive." The interviewees of this opinion propose a global city ideal; one interviewee references the Seattle model, and another envisions a Little Tokyo united with Skid Row and Boyle Heights. A religious leader also references a successful initiative where Korean and Japanese senior citizens breached cultural barriers by watching soap operas

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together as a move in this direction. This religious leader speaks positively about the more diverse people who come to services at his institution. Still, the interviewees who support multiculturalism also want to maintain Little Tokyo's history and heritage. A quotation from a community organization leader best sums up this vision: "Diversity is good. It's trying to make that balance between who's coming into Little Tokyo and who's keeping up the history of Little Tokyo."

Key Points

- Support small businesses as the heart of the community
- Support arts in the community
- Cultivate residential areas
- Need for community space
- Continue to create Little Tokyo as a safe space
- Increase communication within the community
- Japanese culture / Multiculturalism

Analysis and Conclusions



The interviewees' voices that speak to the themes above clearly show the rich texture of life in Little Tokyo. From what we have observed over the course of this project, Little Tokyo is currently at a tipping point in which the future of the community is in danger of being determined by sources outside of the community. From the varied perspectives of interviewees from different positions in the community, we see how the perception of past and future changes and their varying effects will impact opinions on how to help direct the future of Little Tokyo. Many residents and business owners of Little Tokyo have reacted to the prospect of change with a sense of positivity and hope for the future, indicating a positive dynamic toward change and the incredible agency that community members have in Little Tokyo because of its strong leaders and history of community organizing. There are many enthusiastic voices seeking to improve the community and to participate person-

Analysis and Conclusions

ally in that change. However, there are also many pressures to retain the community dynamics and landmarks that Little Tokyo has treasured historically. Balancing this respect for a historical space with the acceptance of change is difficult-- even more so when Little Tokyo's vast array of stakeholders, unique history, distinct multicultural background, and precedent of community involvement pull the conceptions of what a future Little Tokyo should be like in different directions.

The changes that Little Tokyo has been experiencing are already affecting the community dynamic. There are important differences in the ways business owners, community leaders, and residential members of the community view the purpose of little Tokyo and how to help it grow. This is in part because Little Tokyo is such a diverse area that serves many different purposes. Although the concept of multiculturalism has been presented as a building block of the community, it poses its own problems because the more backgrounds that are in need of representation in the community, the more difficult it is to find solutions for problems that everyone can agree on. These differences are more prevalent lately due to the approaching MTA project. The community is at a tipping point: the MTA Regional Connector exposes how fragile a community like Little Tokyo can be when faced with the threat of large corporations, public projects, and real estate developments.

This threat has opened an opportunity for the community to work together, but doing so can be difficult because of the broad and varied impact the community has on different members. Some community members say there is an increase in communication between business, residents, and community leaders, in particular through the Little Tokyo Community Council, while others say there is not enough communication. Either way, Little Tokyo is at a crossroads and continuing work is necessary to ensure its preservation. There is a tone of optimism in most of the interviews as people see the reduction in crime, the increase in business, and the influx



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of youth culture as examples of the positive direction the community is going. This optimism may be coming from the hope that the community will be stronger as it faces changes together. Community members may remember the successes they have had in the past, with their responses to the proposed jail in the community and to the Office Depot project. These provide hope for both surviving and thriving amidst new changes.

Community members come from such different backgrounds that perceptions of the community can sometimes be very different. Some see Little Tokyo as a great triumph of community organizing and a crucible for bringing community members together, while others see it as just a place of business. Some view the community as divided, but this could simply point to a larger trend of community members wanting more direct communication. There are also many anecdotes of good communication currently, especially through associations, community groups, and business organizations. There are notable differences in opinion about various issues between businesses and community organizers, different generations, and residents versus business owners. Through all of the differences in opinion, though, every interviewee celebrates some unique positive dimension of Little Tokyo: a piece of the community that they value, whether other Little Tokyo participants agree with them or not.

Awareness of past changes can have a major impact on how Little Tokyo will change in the future, especially since community organizing has been a major impetus in the past. Many actions in the past, especially in the sphere of community organizing, are being mirrored currently in the attempts to band together and remain an important part of future decision-making, even while some members hope for greater communication. The past also has an impact on the perceptions of important physical spaces in the community, as places that have been important to Little Tokyo historically are considered more essential to the community.

The responses to the MTA Regional Connector by interviewees and the com-

Analysis and Conclusions



munity at large can help to characterize the nature of the community's reaction to an uncertain future. Little Tokyo's community response is distinctive in its positivity and its history of effective change. For example, the exhaustive history of the Little Tokyo redevelopment project offers a multitude of examples of effective community organizing, change, and collaboration, sometimes in opposition to the City of Los Angeles's larger plans. Newer developments, including the nearby Office Depot raise additional questions about the importance of a historical urban landscape and the future of what businesses will be considered positive contributions to the space.

Finally, many interviewees complicate the nature of Little Tokyo's unity. Many are of the opinion that in order to have a strong community, there needs to be unity. One community member states, "It's not just the organizations, it's not just the buildings, it's the people that are involved in all the organizations and spaces." One concern is that while the community is coming together now around the MTA Regional Connector and collaborating on other community concerns such as crime, they do not necessarily come together independently for positive bonding actions. In other

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words, the community comes together in order to address problems to be fixed. Perhaps Little Tokyo is just the most visible in the public eye as it responds to forces that may threaten its viability. A community “coming together” can mean many different things: It can mean mutual support for businesses, regular public meetings, or other ways to continue to develop the community. The Budokan project clearly raises community hopes for continuing to come together in a positive way to continue the social bonds and resources of Little Tokyo.

Overall, Little Tokyo has community energy in abundance and an overall positive reaction in the face of uncertainty. This energy has fueled conversations and compromise in the past, and can continue to in the future. On a broad community level, it treasures such traits as multiculturalism, preservation of history, youth involvement, openness to visitors, positivity, diversity, and community symbiosis. It offers an inspiring example of a growing and changing community held together by community members and basic principles. The phrase “Welcome to Little Tokyo. Please remove your shoes” embodies a collective attitude of respect for Little Tokyo’s history and prospective future and a celebration of Japanese culture while welcoming all people from different backgrounds and walks of life.

Key Points

- Little Tokyo is at a tipping point
- External factors
- Internal dynamics
- History and multiculturalism
- Community response to the MTA’s Regional Connector can help to shape the future
- Response to changes are distinctive, optimistic, and draw on a history of effective change
- Community energy and positive reaction in the face of uncertainty

Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

Background

What is your name?

Where do you work and what do you do?

History

Community organizations:

What does your organization do? What is your organizational mission?

How did your organization come to be in Little Tokyo? Why is it here?

How long has it been here?

Did you grow up in the area? If yes, what kinds of changes have you seen?

What do you know about Little Tokyo's history? If your family was interned, do you know anything about your family's experience returning from internment?

How did you learn the history of Little Tokyo?

What kinds of different stories have you heard about Little Tokyo's history?

What part of your personal history or your organization's history in Little Tokyo would you want to preserve and pass on?

Business:

Why did you choose Little Tokyo for your business?

How long has your business been here?

What type of business prospects did you see in Little Tokyo?

Why have you kept your business here?

Did you grow up in the area? If yes, what kinds of changes have you seen?

What do you know about Little Tokyo's history? Do you or your business have any connection to that history?

If the business was here before internment, do you know anything about the experience of returning from internment?

How did you learn the history of Little Tokyo?

What kinds of different stories have you heard about Little Tokyo's history?

What part of your personal history or your business's history in Little Tokyo would you want to preserve and pass on?

Residents:

How did you choose to live in Little Tokyo?

How long have you lived here?

Did you grow up in the area? If yes, what kinds of changes have you seen?

What do you know about Little Tokyo's history? If your family was interned, do you know anything about your

Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

family's experience returning from internment?

How did you learn the history of Little Tokyo?

What kinds of different stories have you heard about Little Tokyo's history?

What part of your personal history in Little Tokyo would you want to preserve and teach the outside world of LA?

Working / Living in Little Tokyo

Community Organizations

Can you take me along a typical day working in Little Tokyo? (Where do you go, where do you know people, what places do you visit?)

What relationships do you have in Little Tokyo with other organizations or businesses? (both formal and informal)

Whom does your organization serve?

What makes Little Tokyo special or meaningful for the work you do? For you?

What makes Little Tokyo a positive place for your work?

Are there any particular challenges to your organization's work here?

Who do you think are the biggest stakeholders for the community?

Has the Gold Line station affected your organization? If yes, in what ways?

What is the heart of Little Tokyo? (business, cultural, geographical)

Businesses:

Can you take me along a typical day working in Little Tokyo? (Where do you go, where do you know people, what places do you visit?)

What relationships do you have in Little Tokyo with other businesses or organizations? (both formal and informal)

Who is your clientele?

What makes Little Tokyo special or meaningful for business? For you?

What makes Little Tokyo a positive place for your business?

Are there any particular challenges to having a business here?

Who do you think are the biggest stakeholders for the community?

Has the Gold Line station affected your business? If yes, in what ways?

What is the heart of Little Tokyo? (business, cultural, geographical)

Residents:

Can you take me along a typical day living in Little Tokyo? (Where do you go, where do you know people, what places do you visit?)

Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

Do you belong to any organizations in the community?
What makes living in Little Tokyo special or meaningful?
Are there any particular challenges to living here?
How do you see Little Tokyo in relationship to larger communities?
Who do you think are the biggest stakeholders in the community?
Do you commute out of Little Tokyo?
Do you use the Gold Line?
What is the heart of Little Tokyo? (business, cultural, geographical)

Participation in the Life of the Community

Business and Organizations:

What are some ways that you and your business/organization participate in the community?
Why do you do so? (Do you feel responsibility to contribute?)
Does your business or organization sponsor any events in the community? If yes, which?
Would you consider yourself an active member in the community?
What do you hope to accomplish through your participation?
What do you think of community participation by others?
Are you a member of the LT Business Association? The LT Community Council? Do you see any benefits to the community from these? If you're not a member, any particular reasons? Are there specific businesses or organizations you think would be good contributors if they were to become members?

Residents:

What are some ways that you participate in the community? (Do you attend events or classes here?)
Why do you do so?
Do you belong to any organizations here?
Would you consider yourself an active member in the community?
What do you hope to accomplish through your participation?
What do you think of community participation by others?
The Little Tokyo Community Council? Do you see any benefits to the community from these? If you're not a member, any particular reasons? Are there specific businesses or organizations you think would be good contributors if they were to become members?
To what extent do shops in Little Tokyo meet your needs? Do you shop here or elsewhere for what you need?
Are you able to find services you need here?

Changes in the Community (last 5-10 years)

Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

Businesses/Organizations

Have you noticed any changes that affect the community in Little Tokyo over the last 5-10 years? If yes, what kinds of changes? (physical, other)

How do you feel about the changes, both personally and for your business/organization?

How have changes stimulated or raised challenges for your business/organization?

Have you heard about the MTA's Regional Connector? What do you know about it?

What changes might this create for the community? What are your thoughts about those possible changes?

Do you see any major generational differences regarding what Little Tokyo is about?

What changes would you like to see?

Residents:

Have you noticed any changes that affect the community in Little Tokyo over the last 5-10 years? If yes, what kinds of changes? (physical, other)

How do you feel about the changes?

How have changes affected you personally?

Have you heard about the MTA's Regional Connector? What do you know about it?

What changes might this create for the community? What are your thoughts about those possible changes?

Do you see any major generational differences regarding what Little Tokyo is about?

What changes would you like to see?

Vision for the Future

Businesses/Organizations:

In 10 years, what is your vision for the ideal Little Tokyo? How would it be the same or different from how the community is today?

How does your business/organization fit in with that vision?

How is your vision of Little Tokyo connected to Los Angeles more broadly?

What role do you see for other types of businesses, organizations, residences? Do you see a role for chain stores and restaurants, corporate-owned ones?

What is the role of the community's history in your vision of the future?

Do you feel you have input into the future of Little Tokyo? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Do you think Little Tokyo is headed in the direction of your vision or your business's/organization's?

Is your business/organization doing anything to create changes in the community toward this vision?

Residents:

In 10 years, what is your vision for the ideal Little Tokyo? How would it be the same or different from how the community is today?

Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

How is your vision of Little Tokyo connected to Los Angeles more broadly?

What role do you see for different types of businesses, organizations, residences? Do you see a role for chain stores and restaurants, corporate-owned ones?

What is the role of the community's history in your vision of the future?

Do you feel you have input into the future of Little Tokyo? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?



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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the vision, work, and support of the following:

Evelyn Yoshimura, Community Organizing Director, Little Tokyo Service Center

Celestina Castillo, Assistant Director, Center for Community-Based Learning, Occidental College

Kaitlin Toyama, Education in Action Project Assistant, Center for Community-Based Learning, Occidental College

We especially want to thank all of the interviewees who so generously shared their time and thoughts with us.



Little Tokyo and the Multilayered Meaning of Community

Kaitlin Toyama
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“Critical Praxis: Voice, Memory, and Community Transformation”--a community-based learning course offered through the Critical Theory and Social Justice Department at Occidental College in collaboration with the school’s Center for Community-Based Learning--was created for students to explore questions of “voice”; dynamics of race, gender, and class; the multiple perspectives that shape the meaning of community; and the significance of preserving community space at times of great change. For the Spring 2012 semester, the class examined these topics in the context of Little Tokyo in Los Angeles and worked in partnership with the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) and their Community Organizing Director, Evelyn Yoshimura. The final product of this partnership is the report entitled, “*Little Tokyo: History, Memory, and Community Change,*” which compiles findings from sixteen interviews that the students conducted with a variety of Little Tokyo community stakeholders. The role I played in this class was as the Education in Action (EIA) Facilitator¹ and as a bridge between the class and the community as a 4th generation Japanese-American and Los Angeles transplant, who through the course of an undergraduate career, had found home in Little Tokyo.

The following reflection is based on my experience in both of these roles--as a participant observer analyzing the students’ interactions before and during their time with Little Tokyo, and as a community member examining my own transformation through my relationship with the community and my experience working with the class. The first section of this paper, “The Community and the Class,” focuses on the former perspective and explores the ideas of creating community in the classroom and preparing the class to encounter the community. Next, “The Community and the Individual” is my self-reflection on what Little Tokyo has taught me about belonging to a community. These two sections together explore how the meaning of community is reflected in three different types of relationships: between members within a community, between a community and non-community members, and between an individual and a collective. The first two of these relationships are considered through the context of the students’ experiences in the subsections entitled “Creating Community Within The Classroom” and “Preparing the Class to Encounter the Community,” respectively, and the third relationship is explored in the final section in my self-reflection. Each relationship offers a different perspective on the meaning of community and together the themes that emerge are the importance of place, respect, unity, responsibility, and above all, love.

¹ The Education in Action (EIA) program is run through the Occidental College Center for Community-Based Learning (CCBL). The mission of EIA is to challenge and encourage students to become engaged, active participants in class, and to recognize they have a voice in their education. EIA focuses on creating a means for students to serve as facilitators in classes from a range of disciplines. Rather than working as a supplement to the professor academically, these student facilitators work with the professor and class to coordinate a community-based project, which is developed in coordination with Occidental College students, faculty, CCBL, and nearby community institutions.

The Community and the Class: An Exercise in Empathy

We started the semester talking about the importance of place – the ways in which places reflect personal histories, the ways in which people shape the places around them, and the ways in which places shape people. This topic was introduced early on through an exercise I led called the “History of Place Workshop.” In this, students pushed their desks to the classroom walls and imagined the room as a map of the Americas and later as a map of the world. Next, students went to the location where they were born and discussed their connection to that place with someone nearby. For instance, students talked about the hospital where they were born and what brought their parents to that specific city. We continued with the places where people grew up, where they found their “home-away-from-home,” and where their ancestry was traced back.

Creating Community Within the Classroom

This exercise had two main purposes. The first was for this activity to be a group icebreaker that went beyond name memorization and aimed to establish a safe environment where students would feel comfortable engaging with the group. By asking students to share a piece of their personal history, this activity helped each class participant begin to know their peers as complex individuals whose distinct identities have been shaped by the environments they have belonged to. Our class was a very unique mix of students. Though only eight strong it varied by region, grade, major, ethnic background, gender, extracurricular interests, and level of experience doing community-based work. With students coming from such different walks of life, it was important to develop a safe space that was conducive to collaboration and where everyone felt like they belonged and were respected. Actively working to create this type of community environment within the classroom was also significant because it gave the students another way to learn about the meaning of community—by belonging to one themselves.

By creating a sense of community between the students, the class experienced firsthand how the principles of respect, compromise, and cooperation are critical to the prosperity of a collective. In the context of the class, deliberately working to create such an environment and a productive classroom community lent itself to the success of the final report when the class faced challenges similar to those dealt with by the Little Tokyo community.

The Little Tokyo community is small, yet deeply complex. It is multi-ethnic and multi-generational, and is comprised of a variety of stakeholders including businesses, community organizations, and residents who do not always agree on the matters that affect them all. The students encountered this variety of perspectives when they went on their individual interviews and as a result, when we came together to discuss findings on a particular topic we saw that the divides that exist within the Little Tokyo community were present amongst ourselves. Each student felt the responsibility to ensure that their interview subject’s perspective was adequately represented in the final report, and at the same time each student also understood a different reality and opinion based on who they had interviewed. While these views often clashed with one another, the final report is very much a testimony to the community’s ability to come together with the understanding that a united voice is a stronger force than any single individual’s. In a similar way, the students were able to reconcile the different opinions they had heard and bring them together in the report as one, comprehensive voice. For the classroom community to see that the complexity created by differing perspectives is itself a characteristic that defines Little Tokyo was an important lesson in unity, and in the end, it gave the students a glimpse into the type of obstacles faced by all communities.

Preparing the Class to Encounter the Community

A second objective of the “History of Place Workshop” was to prompt the students to recognize their own connection to physical spaces, so that they would be empathetic to that bond when held by others. In the case of Little Tokyo, it was especially important for students to consider how place is tied to identity. Little Tokyo is the historical, cultural, and spiritual home of the Japanese and Japanese-American people of Southern California. As Little Tokyo is faced with the threats of gentrification, corporate takeover, and city encroachment, there is steadfast pushback aimed to maintain its integrity, so that despite any inevitable physical transformation, its history and significance are never lost. Reflecting on their personal connection to place was a way for the students to develop empathy for the Little Tokyo community’s struggle to preserve its home.

Throughout the semester, students engaged in other reflection assignments where they contemplated their engagement with the class and the community. In their written reflections, the students overwhelmingly expressed feelings of responsibility – a responsibility to LTSC to put in a sincere effort while working on the final report and a responsibility to their interview subjects to report their opinions without bias. Constantly encouraging reflection through classroom activities, discussion, and written assignments was critical in both preparing the class to encounter the community as well as guiding them to better understand the relationship they were building with Little Tokyo as non-community members. From the beginning of the semester until the final edits of the report, there was great concern over what the relationship between the class and the community would look like. Students strongly expressed how they did not want to be a group of outsiders coming into Little Tokyo and critiquing the views and operations of the people there. It was encouraging to hear these concerns come from the students themselves because it demonstrated their awareness of the dynamic between themselves and the community. It indicated their understanding that their frames of reference, methods of interpreting experiences, and socioeconomic and historical background were not the same as those held in Little Tokyo, and as a result, they had to continuously check themselves to make sure that they did not impose their own worldview onto Little Tokyo. These exercises in reflection allowed the students to mull over their new connection to Little Tokyo and discover that the relationship that a community holds with non-community members is something that requires the responsibility of sincerity, respect, and self-awareness.

These multiple efforts to use self-reflection to understand the relationship between a community and non-community members led the students to understand it through a lens of empathy and an acceptance of responsibility. This type of transformative learning is consistent with the pedagogy surrounding community-based education that asserts the critical inclusion of exercises in self-reflection. In his article “How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning,” Jack Mezirow writes that “[t]o make ‘*meaning*’ means to make sense of an experience, we make an interpretation of it.” He continues, “[w]hat we perceive and fail to perceive, and what we think and fail to think are powerfully influenced by . . . our frame of reference, that is, a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences” (1990). In this argument, Mezirow is stating that the ways individuals interpret experiences are directly related to their realities, or frames of reference. In order to understand different perspectives it is necessary to deconstruct personal worldviews, and the way to do this is to engage in critical self-reflection. Mezirow defines this as “reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting.” In the context of community and service-based learning, other scholars similarly maintain that “[a]s students reflect on their experiences

in various community settings, they need to struggle to make sense of their experiences when what they see and hear does not fit in with their existing worldview. This necessary adjustment may prompt them to a new visioning of reality” (Zlotkowski and Duffy 2010, 33-43). In our classroom, self-reflection was used as a pedagogical tool aimed at getting students to contemplate their relationship with the Little Tokyo community. The “History of Place” workshop did this by focusing on reflection for the development of empathy, and later on with other forms of reflection, the focus was on pushing the students to think about their personal relationship with Little Tokyo and what that meant for how non-community members must encounter and work with a community. While we were not aiming for self-reflection to provoke any major worldview paradigm shift, we hoped that doing an exercise where students could contemplate their personal experiences would help them make the connection between their realities and the realities of others. Deconstructing a personal relationship would help students empathize with that same relationship when it is held by others, and reflecting on changed perspectives throughout the course of the semester would be a way to learn through experience.

One final way that we worked to prepare the class to encounter the community was by establishing a close relationship to our community partner that made clear the more literal responsibilities and role our class would have in Little Tokyo. During the project, community members relayed some reservation about being written up in a report because they did not want to feel as though they were being studied like animals in a lab. Thus, it was imperative that the relationship between the class and LTSC was built on respect, solidarity, and mutual benefits. The community-based project was developed by LTSC as a part of a larger initiative of asset mapping that documented the businesses, community organizations, and other resources that currently exist in Little Tokyo in light of the major development that will be happening in the coming years. LTSC did not have the capacity to include the voice of its human asset, the community, into this larger project, and so the research that the class conducted contributed directly to the work of LTSC. Thus, while the relationship between the students and the community carried many concerns from both parties, it also carried mutual benefits. LTSC would have this report to use to inform their own decisions about the future, and the students would gain valuable insight about the inner workings of a community.

The steps that were taken to prepare the class to encounter the community were necessary to ensure that the relationship between the students and Little Tokyo was one based on respect, empathy, and responsibility. There is a saying that community organizers like to use when introducing Little Tokyo: “Welcome to Little Tokyo, please take off your shoes.” What this phrase means, besides alluding to the Asian and Japanese custom of removing ones’ shoes before stepping into a home, is that Little Tokyo welcomes new faces and friends, but those who come into the community must respect what is already here. Do not walk over and desecrate our home after we have welcomed you in. In this sense, the steps we took to prepare the students to encounter and understand their relationship to Little Tokyo not only made the class aware that they need to “take off their shoes” in Little Tokyo, but it also taught them why they must do so.

The Community and the Individual: Finding My Way Back Home

I was introduced to Little Tokyo *the Place* at an early age. From the many short visits I took with my grandmother and other relatives living in Los Angeles, I came to know Little Tokyo through its restaurants, the Japanese American National Museum, and the East West Players Theater. Along the way I also developed awareness of Little Tokyo as a place where the preceding generations of my family had been before. As I would walk along First Street and pass

the restaurant where my father used to go during high school, the café where my grandmother would eat lunch after visiting the museum, the bronze statue that an uncle helped to carve, and the theater where another uncle debuted the first play he wrote, Little Tokyo became a place that held memories, and I felt comforted walking around the streets that my family has known.

I was introduced to Little Tokyo *the Community* much later as a college student. When I moved down South to begin my undergraduate education, Little Tokyo was one of the few places that I thought I knew in Los Angeles. However, my understanding of Little Tokyo was limited to the place created by my personal history, and I was not cognizant of anything beyond that. It was not until I participated in a Japanese-American collegiate program during my second year in college when I began to learn about Little Tokyo and the people who have worked to create it for the past 150 years. Those first meetings held at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center marked the beginning of a path along which I connected with those who have organized in Little Tokyo for the last few years and the last few decades; learned about the radical history of the community; and saw that many of the same beliefs, hopes, fears, and passions that I hold resonate and reverberate throughout Little Tokyo. I found that this was a space where I have always belonged because generations of dynamic community members have worked to make it a place represented by the ideals of unity, equity, social justice, and service to others. Little Tokyo is home not only to my family's past but also to my beliefs.

Hillary Clinton wrote that “it takes a village to raise a child,” and I believe that it took a community to raise me as a student. Belonging to the Little Tokyo community led me to develop my identity as a 4th generation Japanese-American – a Yonsei and a Nikkei – and it gave purpose to that sense of belonging as it also taught me about collective good and about contributing to something greater than myself. As I feel like I am part of something bigger in Little Tokyo, I also see that the Little Tokyo community belongs to a greater progressive movement aimed at empowering marginalized communities to make the City a more equitable place for all. Through the few years I have spent being active in the Japanese-American and Asian/Pacific Islander community, I have seen an inherent yet actively cultivated connection between the regions' other distinct ethnic communities. This connection is based on a common commitment to justice and manifests in multicultural programming, political demonstrations, and statements of solidarity. This connection gives people strength, and seeing my community take part in such powerful acts of unity taught me what it means to be an individual operating within a collective. Communities and collectives and movements are vehicles for individuals to pursue justice.

One of the most illuminating descriptions of justice that I have read was written by a young Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote that “[j]ustice is never discontinuously related to love. Justice is a negative application of love. . . . Justice is a check (by force if necessary) upon ambitions of individuals seeking to overcome their own insecurity at the expense of others. Justice is love's message for the collective mind” (Branch 1998, 86). These thoughts deeply resonate with me as I reflect upon what the Little Tokyo community has taught me about justice. Individuals belonging to a larger community and communities belonging to a larger social justice movement are representations of love for something greater than the self. Justice cannot be sought by the oppressed alone, and having the love to belong to a community means that your heart has the capacity to care about others. This sense of compassion, empathy, and love that comes from belonging to a community is fundamental in the pursuit of justice.

In one of the readings assigned to the class, “The Paradox of Dispersal: Ethnic Continuity & Community Development Among Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo,” authors Toji and Umemoto argue that the extent to which a community can be a space that allows people to connect and participate in a wide range of ways is indicative of the community's strength (2003,

21-45). Being an EIA facilitator allowed me to experience the truth in Toji and Umemoto's assertion as this experience gave me a new role to play in the community and a new perspective on my relationship to Little Tokyo. Little Tokyo was fundamental in helping me get through my undergraduate education with wisdom and a commitment to justice. Little Tokyo was my home, my safe space. Little Tokyo gave me strength, and inseparable from that strength will always be responsibility – a duty to make sure that Little Tokyo's history will be remembered, that its community members will always have a cultural home to come back to, and that future generations will be able to walk the same streets and feel the same sense of support that I have. My experience as an EIA facilitator gave me the opportunity to connect and participate in the community using my identity as a student. It was a way to bring my education home by taking the skills that I had internalized – research skills, critical analysis, and essay writing – and channeling them into a project that would support the work that others are doing to serve Little Tokyo.

As I have already described, Little Tokyo is a community and a place that in many ways is defined by its diversity. The range of stakeholders, opinions, and visions present within the community can easily lead to debilitating divides, however what has arisen instead is a sense of unity and strength. This is because Little Tokyo is a place where a White student from the East Coast and a Japanese-American student with roots already growing in Little Tokyo can establish relationships to the community, can see those relationships bloom into a sense of responsibility to the community, and can use their backgrounds and identities to carry out that responsibility. In this way, Toji and Umemoto have illuminated the essence of Little Tokyo's strength – the ability to develop responsibility and the avenue to fulfill it. As it seems, the relationships that exist between members of the community, between community and non-community members, and between individuals and the collective are not only what define Little Tokyo, but they also weave together to make Little Tokyo strong.

Conclusion

Through this class, the multilayered meaning of community was able to emerge and that is demonstrated through the different relationships that were cultivated over the semester – between outsiders and a community, between different community members, and between individuals and the collective. The relationship between the class and Little Tokyo demonstrates how communities must be treated with integrity and respect, and how those principles must be actively sought through different forms of preparation. The relationship between members of a community demonstrates the complexity of collaboration yet shows that the ability for disagreeing parts to come together in unity is what makes communities strong; it is necessary for their survival. Finally, my personal relationship with the collective shows that the essence of participating in a community is that of responsibility, love, and ultimately justice.

What I take away from this experience is twofold. First, observing class interactions and reflecting on my own relationship with Little Tokyo taught me that the meaning of community is multilayered. Community is the product of the different yet interwoven relationships that surround it, and this makes communities complex, dynamic, and strong.

Second, this experience was not only about learning the meaning of community. It was also about learning from the community – Little Tokyo taught me about justice. Belonging to the Little Tokyo community showed me what it looks like to work in solidarity with other communities in a movement fighting for ideals – equity, agency, opportunity – that affect all

people. Having love for a collective greater than the self is fundamental to communities and it is fundamental to justice.

In closing, this community-based learning experience was tremendously significant to me as it symbolized the culmination of my time as an undergraduate within the Little Tokyo community by connecting my academic world with my Little Tokyo world. In comparison to other community-based learning classes that I have taken, this was by far the most meaningful because instead of operating from the outside – applying class material to events surrounding a community – the class built relationships that allowed them learn from Little Tokyo in a way that was truly genuine. Community-based learning for us was not about choosing a particular group of people or a place to help us understand a topic, but it was about how to learn through relationships and experience. Instead of simply learning about the various issues surrounding a certain people and leaving that knowledge in the classroom, we worked to assist the work of the community and in turn, we were all profoundly changed by it.

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