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History in the Making: The Construction of Community Memory and Racial Subjects in
the *Boyle Heights* Exhibition

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Su-Shuan Chen

Committee in charge:

Professor Natalia Molina, Chair
Professor Roberto Alvarez
Professor Luis Alvarez

2010

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2010

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

History in the Making: The Construction of Community Memory and Racial Subjects in
the *Boyle Heights* Exhibition

by

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Master of Arts in Ethnic Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2010

Professor Natalia Molina, Chair

History in the Making: The Construction of Community Memory and Racial Subjects in the Boyle Heights Exhibition, examines a 2002 exhibition titled *Boyle Heights: The Power of Place*. Organized and hosted by the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, *Boyle Heights* delineated what it was like to live in a multiethnic East Los Angeles community during the early and mid twentieth century. The thesis examines why *Boyle Heights* was so successful in garnering enthusiasm from the Boyle Heights community. I posit that the exhibit's success was largely due to its compelling narrative depicting Boyle Heights as a unique and ethnically diverse community whose residents built a tight-knit neighborhood while embodying the hallmarks of law-abiding, all-American model citizenship. I argue that this depiction of Boyle Heights helped counteract popular stereotypes of East Los Angeles as a vice-

ridden and impoverished zone. While *Boyle Heights* made many positive contributions to its subject community, I also assert that the exhibition had to leave out important stories in its effort to present a certain image of Boyle Heights. Stories left out include episodes of interethnic conflicts, intraethnic tensions, and subjects suggesting non-model, criminal behaviors. Amidst the effort to delineate Boyle Heights as a harmonious and model example of interethnic community, these silences became a necessary device to convincingly bolster the neighborhood's worthiness of being celebrated and remembered in the context of today's society and public perceptions. More importantly, what do these silences reveal about the workings of racial socioeconomic positioning in American society?

Introduction

On September 8, 2002, the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, unveiled its latest exhibit to the public, titled *Boyle Heights: The Power of Place*. Chronicling over one hundred of years of history in the East Los Angeles community of Boyle Heights, the exhibit captivated audiences and became one of the most successful projects ever curated by JANM. Between opening day and closing day on February 23, 2003, the exhibit attracted nearly 46,000 visitors.¹ Five years after its closing, memories and images from the *Boyle Heights* exhibition continue to captivate its audiences who avidly purchase *Boyle Heights* materials, ask for similar exhibitions on other communities, and reminisce about the exhibition with museum staff and volunteers.²

A primary reason behind *Boyle Heights*' success was that it represented a sincere effort by JANM to offer viewers a compelling story that would elicit pride and admiration for the Boyle Heights community. JANM was intent on presenting the exhibit in a sensitive manner, and embraced the burgeoning community collaboration model that was being used increasingly by museums to curate its shows. JANM executed this model

¹ “*Boyle Heights: The Power of Place* On-Site Attendance: 9/8/02 – 2/23/03” JANM Visitor Services internal document. Dated February 23, 2003.

² Materials generated by the *The Boyle Heights Project* after the closing of the *Boyle Heights* exhibition included *Los Angeles's Boyle Heights*, an exhibition photo catalogue published in 2005 by Arcadia Press; a handbook containing oral history biographies and essays associated with the project called “The Boyle Heights Oral History Project: A Multiethnic and Collaborative Exploration of a Los Angeles Neighborhood” published in 2003; and the “Crossroads: Boyle Heights” DVD of Boyle Heights oral history clips and neighborhood tour issued in 2007. (The DVD was the reissue of a previous short documentary on VHS. However, many of those who purchased the VHS also bought the DVD because the DVD contained extras not included in the VHS.)

by reaching out to hundreds of individuals who had familial or professional ties to Boyle Heights and asking them to contribute photos, artifacts, and stories for exhibition. This collection and development phase lasted two years and enabled a rich palette of personal stories and images to dictate the tone and content of *Boyle Heights*. One can say that organizers of *Boyle Heights* did not so much set out to present an official, scholarly, and authoritative account of a community's history. Rather, they positioned themselves as facilitators who brought out the voices of individual community members and allowed them to shine through this exhibition.

In the end, JANM stirred up pride and curiosity towards Boyle Heights, something that was made evident in favorable audience responses and press coverage. *Boyle Heights* also changed the image of the neighborhood in the minds of many people who no longer viewed the district as a zone of disarray and poverty that was inhabited by illegal immigrants, criminals, and transients. Instead, the image of Boyle Heights became that of a culturally-rich and historic neighborhood inhabited by law abiding citizens who come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and who all care deeply for their community. As a former staff member who began working at JANM right after the closing of *Boyle Heights*, I was able to still witness much of the excitement that lingered long after the project. I was so intrigued by the exhibition and its fascinating story of interethnic bonding and community-building between people of various ethnicities who lived in mid-twentieth century Boyle Heights that I decided to examine *Boyle Heights* in a more in-depth manner for my master's thesis project. As I assessed the content of *Boyle Heights* through an Ethnic Studies perspective, interviewed staff and advisors associated with the project, and read secondary literature on 1900s Los Angeles history, I began to

see that the *Boyle Heights* exhibit unearthed far-reaching implications—both positive and negative—for not only LA, but also for what it means to be a racialized subject in the United States.

On one hand, the exhibit was able to ameliorate public perceptions of Boyle Heights. Through this project, the ethnic communities of Boyle Heights were essentially transformed from racialized and criminalized populations to paragons of ethnic diversity and model citizens. How *Boyle Heights* succeeded in doing so occupies the focus of this thesis. At the same time, this thesis also delves into questions concerning both positive and potentially negative consequences of the exhibit's interventions on community image and historical memory. For in the course of presenting a certain perspective and narrative of Boyle Heights, exhibition developers had to make important decisions on which stories to include and which ones to exclude from the exhibition, which themes to highlight, and which interpretations to highlight. Through this process then, who in the Boyle Heights community and which types of subjects are the ones that stand to gain or lose the most in *Boyle Heights*?

Likewise, who and what events get negated and erased from historical memory? What do the answers reveal about power dynamics surrounding the way ethnic and racialized groups gain social and political standing? In short, there are events and individuals who cannot appear in the exhibit--those who can potentially harm the community's public image and exacerbate its negative stereotypes. Yet it is worth asking what happens to these events and individuals that are pathologized by mainstream society and also silenced by their own communities? And what do these silences reveal about the workings of racial socioeconomic positioning in American society? This thesis explores

the answers through all these questions through an in-depth analysis of *Boyle Heights*, as well as discussions on how citizenship, agency, and power factor into the ultimate manifestation of the exhibition.

The Story of Boyle Heights and JANM

The tale of *Boyle Heights* is a story involving two neighboring districts: Boyle Heights (the subject matter of the exhibit) and Little Tokyo (home to JANM). Boyle Heights is technically situated within the boundaries of Los Angeles city proper; yet stands socially and culturally isolated from the rest of the city. Although Boyle Heights is located less than five miles from downtown Los Angeles and easily reached by car, few non-residents or non-employees venture into the neighborhood. This applies to those who reside or work in adjacent Little Tokyo, which borders the western end of Boyle Heights. Despite their proximity, Boyle Heights and Little Tokyo occupy two different worlds when it comes to their cultural, racial and socio-economic landscapes. Boyle Heights is a low-income, densely populated barrio. Approximately ninety-five percent of the district is Latino while poverty levels hover around thirty percent of the population.³ Many outsiders regard Boyle Heights with apprehension due to its impoverished setting and a negative public image. Little Tokyo is the Japanese American cultural center of Southern California—home to both the Japanese American National Museum and Japanese American Community & Cultural Center, along with over fifty Japanese-themed restaurants, boutiques, and service-oriented businesses. Characterized by an upscale, business-friendly atmosphere, Little Tokyo has seen rapid gentrification in recent years

³ “Boyle Heights: City of Los Angeles,” <http://www.laalmanac.com/LA/la00c5.htm> (accessed March 19, 2009)

and attracts an ethnically diverse range of tourists, downtown employees, and arts enthusiasts throughout the week.

Therefore, when the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) raised the possibility of organizing an exhibition on Boyle Heights' history in 1999, it appeared to be an unlikely venue for such a project. Not only was JANM located in a district that on the surface had little connection to Boyle Heights, it was also an institution whose mission appeared irrelevant to Boyle Heights. JANM is first and foremost a museum dedicated to preserving Japanese American history, with a particular emphasis on the period from early immigration (mid/late nineteenth century) until the end of World War II. Boyle Heights, on the other hand, has very few Japanese American residents and no pre-existing connections to JANM. In spite of this, JANM approved plans to embark upon the *Boyle Heights Project*, an ambitious undertaking that consisted of multiple components and took three years to plan and execute.

Conceptualized and managed by JANM curator Sojin Kim, the *Boyle Heights Project* represented an extension of Kim's previous experiences on a Los Angeles Public Library photo exhibition titled *Shades of L.A.*⁴ In the course of highlighting the

⁴ Prior to working for JANM, Sojin Kim worked with the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) on a photo exhibition project titled *Shades of L.A.: Pictures from Ethnic Family Albums*. This experience exerted a profound influence on Kim and would inspire her to conceptualize *The Boyle Heights Project* in 1999.

The *Shades of L.A.* project was conceived by the LAPL upon realization that its photo collection—as extensive as it was—lacked representation of the city's ethnic history. *Shades of L.A.* curator Carolyn Kozo Cole noted in the exhibition catalogue that “The current Library photo collection tends only to represent Anglo families of prominence and wealth.” This situation was made all the more glaring when researchers from the Southern California Library for Social Sciences and Research approached LAPL in 1990 for pre-1965 images of Watts and went away virtually empty-handed. According to Cole, “Not only were there no [pre-1965] photographs of Watts in the files, but Boyle Heights, Jefferson Park, Central Avenue, Maravilla, and dozens of other smaller but established ethnic neighborhoods were also undocumented.” Thus began a six-year undertaking in which LAPL would host multiple photo collection days throughout different parts of the city to search for historical ethnic community photos. The aim of these photo days was to find images on this subject where Cole felt they would be most readily available—through personal collections and family albums of Los Angeles' ethnic communities, specifically those who had lived in the city for

underrepresented narrative of Los Angeles' ethnic history, *Shades of L.A.* not only raised awareness of the city's ethnic diversity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also increased the library's collection of historical ethnic photographs from a virtually nonexistent number to one that numbered over 5,000. Inspired by her participation in *Shades of L.A.*, Kim sought to bring similar benefits to Boyle Heights and JANM through a project that would explore the ethnic and racial diversity of Boyle Heights' obscure history. Besides Kim's influence, *The Boyle Heights Project* was also made possible by its propitious timing vis-à-vis JANM's institutional history. The inception of the project took place during a period when JANM was seeking to expand its cross-racial collaborations and position itself as an institution that represented not only interests of the Japanese American community, but also of other ethnic and racial groups.⁵ In funding

many generations. In the end, *Shades of L.A.* helped bolster LAPL's ethnic history photo collection by over 5,000 images, many of which were displayed at its exhibition.

⁵ Founded in 1985 by a group of Little Tokyo businessmen and former Japanese American World War II veterans, the Japanese American National Museum dedicated the bulk of its efforts during its first decade to preserving the story of the World War II Japanese American incarceration. The goal was to ensure that such events would never happen again nor be erased from historical memory. In the process, JANM expanded its scope to covering other eras in Japanese American history spanning the second half of the nineteenth century and into the present day. The result of these efforts was that JANM would firmly establish itself as the nation's largest repository of Japanese American history—collecting and soliciting artifacts, photographs, written records, and other materials—and as the most prominent educational institution on Japanese American causes.

During the mid 1990s, JANM added another dimension to its organizational agenda. The museum not only wanted to advance the history and political standing of Japanese Americans, but also render the story of Japanese Americans relevant to the large fabric of American culture and society. Initially JANM's efforts to forge cross-racial consciousness manifested itself in limited ways, often taking a back seat to the agenda of promoting Japanese American history as a sobering reminder of a past historical injustice. Eventually, opportunities to present exhibitions extending beyond Japanese American stories emerged as JANM began to explore the notion of engaging in collaborative projects with local institutions. The most prominent was a 1995 art exhibition series—*Finding Family Stories*—in which JANM partnered with the Chinese American Museum, the California African American Museum, and Self-Help Graphics to display works from artists selected by each institution. Different iterations of *Finding Family Stories* would occur in 1998 and 2003 with each featuring a different selection of minority artists representing each partnering institution. Other exhibitions on Asian American art also found their way into JANM's gallery spaces between 1994 and 1999. By 1999, JANM had begun to experience notable growth in revenue and staff which translated into a willingness to embrace projects that were more ambitious in scope and undertaking.

and organizing the *Boyle Heights* exhibit, JANM's goals were not only to raise public awareness of Los Angeles' ethnic history and to enhance public appreciation of Boyle Heights' community history, they were also to strengthen JANM's ties to neighboring communities, to bolster JANM's standing as an advocate of multiracial interests, and to increase JANM's collection of Boyle Heights multiethnic holdings.⁶ Thus, with the full support of JANM, Kim set out to create a multifaceted project that would encompass extensive documentation of Boyle Heights community history and close collaborations with individuals and organizations having long-time ties to Boyle Heights.⁷

Boyle Heights: The Power of Place

Although multiple components made up *The Boyle Heights Project*, the centerpiece of the entire undertaking was the exhibition, *Boyle Heights: The Power of Place*, which narrated the history of Boyle Heights from the (1880s) until present-day 2002.⁸ Through extensive communication with members of the Boyle Heights "source

All of these experiences would prove invaluable to bolstering JANM's credibility amongst LA cultural institutions, and enhance its abilities to pull off an ambitious collaboration project.

⁶ The official goals of the project were stated the following way in a final grant report prepared by JANM: A) To promote collaborations and intercultural exchanges between organizations, scholars, and community members, B). To document, interpret, and share the history of the diverse communities in Boyle Heights through the voices and perspectives of those who lived there; C). To engage and challenge a broad spectrum of individuals and organizations to participate in a civic dialogue that connects the stories of past and present neighborhood residents, as well as those of people from different ethnic/racial backgrounds.

⁷ Four Boyle Heights institutions were asked to collaborate with JANM on the *Boyle Heights Project* as institutional partners. They were selected based on depth of Boyle Heights community involvement, pre-existing ties to JANM, and personal connections to Kim. Institutional partners of the *Boyle Heights Project* were the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California, the International Institute of Los Angeles, Self-Help Graphics, and Theodore Roosevelt High School. In addition, thirty individuals—current residents, former residents, key personnel from Boyle Heights service organizations, members of the Boyle Heights arts and culture community—were asked to serve on the community advisory panel while five scholars were asked to form the scholarly advisory committee.

⁸ The full name of the project was, *The Boyle Heights Project: A Multiethnic and Collaborative Exploration of a Los Angeles Neighborhood*. It was initially launched with five components, which were: an oral history project, a radio program, a photo collection day, a tour of Boyle Heights, and a public

community “from 1999 to 2002, JANM was able to compile a sizeable collection of photos, family albums, artifacts, artwork, home videos, music recordings, and oral history interviews from various solicitation events, including Community Forums where current and former residents of Boyle Heights shared stories of living in the neighborhood, Collection Days when community members brought Boyle Heights images and artifacts to JANM staff, and many personal conversations and interviews between community members and museum staff.⁹ Most of these events were held in Boyle Heights, including two of the Collection Days at Roosevelt High School, the Community Forum at the International Institute, and several oral histories in the homes of Boyle Heights residents. In addition, JANM also hosted several public events celebrating Boyle Heights arts and music, and oversaw an internship program for Roosevelt High Schools to interview elderly residents and create audio stories documenting what they learned. Such an extensive prologue had multiple purposes for the exhibit. They not only gave JANM access to a wealth of artifacts, images, and stories, but also maximized opportunities for

symposium. Eventually as the project gained more funding and progressed further along, it also came to encompass community panels, community forums, exhibit collection days, reunion events for former community residents, high school oral history internships, and additional public programs and outreach events aimed at facilitating Boyle Heights dialogue and gathering information. Most of these efforts were eventually funneled into the exhibition, which still stood as the central focus of the project. Nonetheless, it is also true that the project, in addition to supporting the exhibit, also went beyond the scope of the exhibit when it came to the presentation of information. For much of the information acquired did not actually end up in the exhibit, and had to be made accessible to the public in other ways, such as public materials or archival holdings. At the same time, the project also hosted public programs intended to supplement and enrich the knowledge that was included in the exhibit.

⁹ In *Museums and Source Communities*, Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown use the term “source community” to refer to the groups and cultures which produce the artifacts, images, and stories that museum collect. Ivan Karp in *Museums and Communities*, uses the term “community” to refer to the same concept. For the purposes of clarity, I have decided to go with Peers’ and Brown’s terminology to describe a specific invocation of information-providing communities in relation to museum projects, agendas, and collaboration.

one-on-one interactions between JANM staff and Boyle Heights residents, and helped to generate excitement and public for the project.

From the outset, JANM presented *Boyle Heights* as an exhibit dedicated to exploring the community life of past and present residents, but primarily interested in one particular theme, that of interethnic relationships. The following description and appeal appeared in JANM's 2000 flyer promoting the upcoming Community Forum, in which any individual with ties to Boyle Heights was welcome to attend:

A major museum exhibition is being planned to celebrate this unique and important Los Angeles neighborhood.

Come learn about the plans for the exhibition and participate in discussion with project organizers who want to learn from you—past and present Boyle Heights residents—about life in the neighborhood. The exhibition will represent diverse voices and experiences with an emphasis on inter-ethnic relations...¹⁰

Boyle Heights' relationship to interethnicity lay in its status as one of the nation's most ethnically diverse neighborhoods during the years of 1920-1960. This was particularly significant for JANM because the theme of interethnicity allowed the museum to establish a clear connection to the Boyle Heights community and justify this exhibition in the first place. During the mid-twentieth century, the neighborhood housed a large Japanese American population. In fact, *Pacific Citizen* founding editor Harry Honda recalled that "There were no Japanese businesses in Boyle Heights... Evidently, Little Tokyo was near enough to meet such needs. In fact, Boyle Heights was seldom regarded by the Issei as another area but more of a living extension for Little Tokyo."¹¹

¹⁰ Japanese American National Museum, "Your Boyle Heights: Community Forum," flyer produced in September of 2000.

¹¹ Harry Honda, "Little Tokyo Life: Boyle Heights," *Pacific Citizen*, May 18, 1984.

Noted Los Angeles historian George Sanchez supported this point when he noted that many of the early Japanese residents in the community had residences, service organizations, and businesses on First Street—which also cut through Little Tokyo—because they envisioned Boyle Heights as an extension of Little Tokyo. This perception that Boyle Heights was not so much a separate community, but a continuation of the Japanese American neighborhood definitely influenced how Kim approached the exhibit. She shared to me that: “[One objective of Boyle Heights] was to show the JA community not as discrete and isolated, but as part of a large and diverse community. It was to look at the forced removal of JAs not only from the perspective of JAs, but from their neighbors and friends. Lloyd Inui (JANM consultant) summed up the idea really well when he wrote that Boyle Heights epitomized ‘the idea of community as diversity.’”¹²

Given the fact that JANM’s bond to Boyle Heights was facilitated by the historic interethnicity in Boyle Heights, exhibition organizers devoted the bulk of their energies to collecting materials that corresponded with ethnic diversity and early/mid-1900s Boyle Heights. Through all of their collection events and exhaustive trips to and from Boyle Heights, JANM staff came in contact with thousands of photographs and a plethora of stories and artifacts to potentially include in the exhibit. When *Boyle Heights* finally opened, it had whittled its now-sizeable collection of Boyle Heights materials down to approximately three hundred photographs, fifty artifacts, twenty-five oral histories, thirty audio clips, a short film made especially for the exhibition containing oral history clips and a neighborhood tour, as well as numerous props and visual elements. *Boyle Heights*

¹² Sojin Kim, telephone interview with the author, July 30, 2009.

occupied the downstairs exhibition space of JANM’s New Pavilion Building—the Weingart Foundation Gallery. The following diagram shows the physical layout of *Boyle Heights*:

Heights:

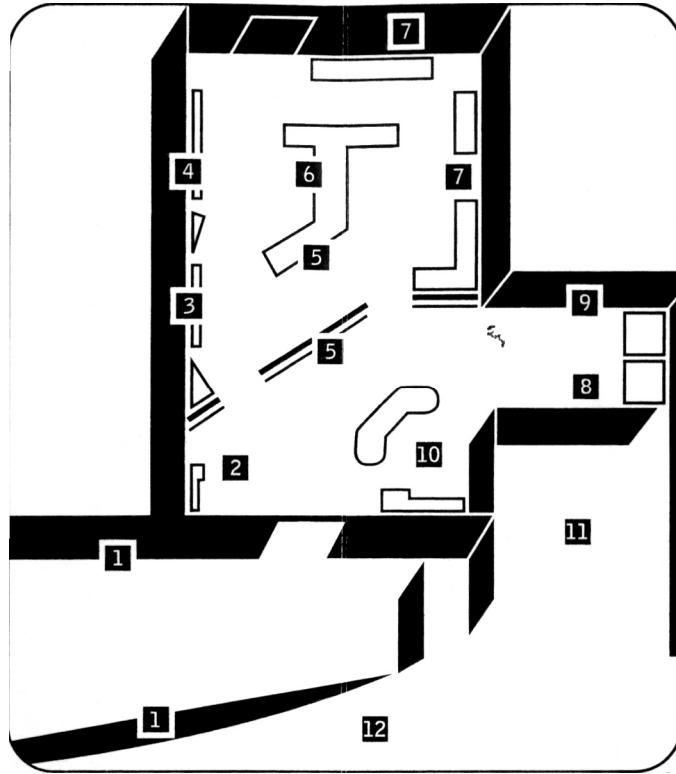


Figure 1.1: *Boyle Heights* gallery layout

Boyle Heights was divided into nine subsections, as designated by numbers 1 through 9 in the above floor plan. Each section represented a recurring theme, physical site, or social activity that exhibition organizers deemed important and worthy of emphasizing. The following table offers a description of each section and its primary message and/or content:

Table 1.1: *Boyle Heights* gallery sections

SECTION NUMBER	SECTION TITLE	SECTION DESCRIPTION
1	“All Roads Lead to Boyle Heights.”	This introductory area provided a brief overview of Boyle Heights history and set out to frame Boyle Heights as a neighborhood that has always served as a historic and contemporary entry point for newcomers and immigrants. Family photographs dominated this section.
2	“East of the Los Angeles River.”	This section acknowledged that Boyle Heights’ residents have experienced a series of historic upheavals rooted in racial prejudice. Yet, the key of this section lies in the last sentence of the text panel which states that “Throughout the neighborhood’s history, residents have often organized to protect and promote the well-being of their communities.”
3	“East Side Greeting, We Welcome All.”	Section 3 focused on the histories and accomplishments of social service organizations established in Boyle Heights to serve the needs of its immigrant neighborhoods and changing populations.
4	“Faith in a Community,”	Section 4 examined the multiple religious organizations and diverse religious practices adopted by Boyle Heights residents. Religions represented included Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, and (Shinto.)
5	“The Heart of the Eastside”	This section’s title was a direct reference to the intersection of Cesar E. Chavez Avenue and Soto Street, which has served as the commercial and social center of Boyle Heights for many decades.
6	“World War II: ‘To Solve the World’s Problems,’”	Section 6 discussed multiple events that affected Boyle Heights during the war, including the rise of wartime defense industries, the internment of Japanese Americans, changes to community demographics, Zoot Suit Riots, and the participation by many residents in the U.S. military.
7	“Cold War Fears and Postwar Dreams.”	Section 7 introduced additional historic events that fractured and tested the community, such as anti-Communism red-baiting, widespread housing racial discrimination, employment discrimination, freeway constructions, and departure of large populations for nearby suburbs.
8	“Growing up on the Eastside,”	This section focused mainly on what it was like to be a child or teenager growing up in Boyle Heights.
9	“The Power of Place”	Images and artifacts in the exhibit’s final section reaffirmed the sentimental value that Boyle Heights has represented for residents both past and present.

The nine thematic sections covered a wide array of subjects and generated extremely positive feedback from the audiences, who not only inspired by the celebratory tone of the exhibit, but were also delighted to see so many familiar images and materials. Some were so excited to find their family photos in the exhibit that they returned for multiple visits with several individuals even flying in from out of state. Others absorbed the plethora of landscapes from their childhood or youth, and wrote notes in the visitor comment books to record the addresses of former addresses, lists of favorite neighborhood spots, or stories of unexpected reunions taking place in the *Boyle Heights* gallery. Interestingly, negative feedback in the visitor comment books was extremely few and far between, and the sense I grasped from audience notes was that *Boyle Heights* had struck a powerful chord in its ability to bring a historic Boyle Heights—one that had vividly colored the childhood of so many exhibit viewers—back to life, and celebrate it as a truly special yet quintessentially American community.

Literature Review: Los Angeles' Interethnic History

The *Boyle Heights* exhibition was a project of historical memory and celebration around ethnic diversity and harmony in an East LA neighborhood. At the same time, it engaged in critical conversations with the academic community whose work centered on the city's history of race. One important contribution of *Boyle Heights* was to make mainstream audiences and scholars aware of new possibilities in understanding of how ethnicity operated in Los Angeles over the last century. Even though *Boyle Heights* was billed as a collaborative foray into over one hundred years of community history, JANM also made it clear from the outset of the exhibit development process that its primary interest in the project was to highlight Boyle Heights' unique legacy of ethnic diversity

and interethnic relationships, most of which took place between 1920 and 1960. This was the time period when Boyle Heights was home to many working class ethnic immigrants who settled in the community because much of the city had become exclusive only to whites and were therefore off-limits to ethnic whites and racialized groups (i.e. Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans).

During the time when *Boyle Heights* opened, the history of interethnic relationships in Los Angeles was only a burgeoning topic that was receiving increased scholastic attention.¹³ Before the late 1990s, most major works and exhibitions on race in Los Angeles only examined the histories and issues on single racial or ethnic group.¹⁴ This began to change in the late 1990s when increasing numbers of scholars from History and American Studies produced works on multiracial and interethnic dynamics in LA history.¹⁵ What was important about this new body of scholarship was that it addressed a major vacuum in how past scholarship had framed race in Los Angeles and also in other

¹³ By “interethnic relationships,” I am primarily referring to the bonds and interactions shared between multiple minority groups. It is important to note, however, that the relationships of whites with minorities must also be factored as a powerful element and shaper of interethnic relationships.

¹⁴ Such works included books and studies like *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1940-1945* by George Sanchez, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* by Ricardo Romo, *Pioneer Jews: A New Life in the Far West* by Harriet Rochlin, and “The Japanese of Los Angeles” by William M. Mason and Dr. John A. McKinstry. At the same time, ethnic and cultural institutions such as the Japanese American National Museum, the California African American Museum, the Skirball Cultural Center, the Mexican Cultural Institute and Chinese American History Society of Southern California sponsored multiple exhibits, public programs, and educational programs throughout Los Angeles, most of which also examined ethnic groups discretely.

¹⁵ By “interethnicity,” I am referring to bonds and interactions that are forged across ethnic lines. Boyle Heights was a prime location for interethnicity during mid-1900s Los Angeles because of its diverse ethnic population. Multiethnicity refers to the plurality and co-existence of several different ethnic groups in the same city or neighborhood. Multiculturalism is another important term to acknowledge in the conversation of ethnic and racial plurality and interactions. It describes a popular outlook that celebrates the harmonious mingling of several cultures, ethnicities, and races. Multiculturalism also operates on the assumption that communities with different cultures and ethnicities are enriched by the cultural exchange that will inevitably take place.

parts of the country. Previously, studies on minorities in the nation's largest cities had limited their focus to mono-ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatowns, black ghettos, or Latino barrios. However, failure to go beyond this framework led to knowledge gaps and shortcomings on how racialized populations actually lived, something that became more apparent as more and more scholars began to argue that urban ethnic districts were in fact ethnically heterogenous regardless of their designation and reputation. For instance, historian Mark Wild noted that Japanese Americans never occupied more than 40% of Little Tokyo's population, even from 1900 to 1950 when the numbers of Japanese American in the district were at their highest. Instead, at any given moment in Little Tokyo's history, at least 60% of its population was made up by whites, Latinos, and African Americans.¹⁶

Out of the several key studies that examined interethnicity in historical Los Angeles, two—*Making a Non-White America* by Allison Varzally and *Street Meeting* by Mark Wild—focused on the question of “What did it mean for multiple groups to co-exist alongside one another as neighbors, co-workers, schoolmates, and members of the same community?” Both adopt a historical approach to studying the emergence of multiethnic populations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Primarily concerned with examining the intricacies of interethnic interactions—the various ways in which different races and ethnicities interacted with each other, ranging from positive ones to acrimonious ones—Varzally and Wild focused heavily on the issue of how such exchanges impacted personal lives and community dynamics. *Making a Non-White*

¹⁶ Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 25.

America and *Street Meeting* were characterized by the use of meticulous historical research to analyze how cross-ethnic relationships shaped the racial and cultural identities of parties involved, their social and political statuses, and their kinships.

These books contain important parallels to the theme of *Boyle Heights*, because all negated the prevailing notion that historic racial communities were segregated along ethnic lines. In reality, members of different ethnicities shaped each other's lives in ways that were unexpected and unknown to both academics and the general public. All three projects spoke of a pan-ethnic identity in which individual ethnic, racial, or cultural identities were often subsumed under an overarching identity centered on community. This was particularly true for second-generation immigrants who came of age in Los Angeles' ethnically diverse neighborhoods during the early and mid-1900s, as these individuals rejected the racial and ethnic divisions that some of their parents had lived by. Instead, their shared ties as peers and neighbors in the Boyle Heights community enabled them to overlook ethnic boundaries in selecting friends and embracing customs of different cultures. This notion of a powerful, overriding communal bond would form the basis of all three projects, and inform how they contributed to knowledge on multiethnicity. Besides the fact that Varzally, Wild, and the *Boyle Heights* exhibition all made important contributions to our understanding of racial communities in nineteenth through twentieth-century Los Angeles, they also viewed this concept of a peaceful, productive and multicultural existence as an ideal worth striving for.

Varzally and Wild examined ethnically diverse historic communities as a response against previous understandings of racial/ethnic communities. At the same time, many other scholars of interethnicity critiqued the assumption that power relations in race

are only comprised of two tiers, that of a dominant white establishment and that of minority groups who are always beholden to their Caucasian counterparts. In implicit ways, Varzally, Wild, and *Boyle Heights* all critiqued this power scheme by showing (through depictions of interethnicity) that minorities' station in life are determined not only by forces of white racism and hegemony, but also by members of minority groups. Other scholars however, conceptualized the dynamics of interethnicity in a different way that pushed their critique of the overly simplistic racial power structure into the forefront of their arguments. These authors examined interethnicity not so much by looking at actual manifestations of interethnic interactions in daily life, but by analyzing how the activities and public discourse surrounding one racialized group shaped the socio-political fortunes of different racial populations in the city. Studies falling within this category include *The Shifting Grounds of Race* by Scott Kurashige, *Fit to Be Citizens* by Natalia Molina, *Black, Brown, Yellow & Left* by Laura Pulido and "Urbanization as Culture: Youth and Race in Postwar Los Angeles" by Michael Nevin Willard. Employing notions such as racial hierarchy¹⁷ and racial triangulation¹⁸ to define the relative political, social, and economic status of minority races in relation to each other, all of these studies highlight the fact that what happens to one group significantly impacts other ethnic groups. For instance, when one ethnic group such as Japanese Americans attained elevated status in mainstream political economy due to propagation of the model minority

¹⁷ Posited by historian Tomas Almaguer, racial hierarchy refers to the ways in which one ethnicity's public image and socio-political standing can then be used by the white establishment to determine those of other ethnic groups. For Almaguer's exposition on racial hierarchies, see Tomás Almaguer's *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*.

¹⁸ The process of racial triangulation is the valuation and social ranking of racial groups in relation to one another. When racial triangulation takes place, the mainstream society will often use one group's success to deride another group's failures. At the same time, minority racial and ethnic groups may form tenuous relationships with each other, alternating between phases of collaboration and phases of competition.

thesis, African Americans faced the possibility of degradation from unfavorable comparisons to their Japanese American counterparts. In other situations, political gain by one racial group could either translate positively for others—as in the case of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement—or result in losses for some people. Regardless, these works highlight the fact that the relative status of each racialized group vis à vis each other is always tenuous, which leads to interracial hostility and competition, or to fleeting political alliances.

Although *Boyle Heights* does not explicitly delve into the subject of racial hierarchy, racial triangulation or interethnic power struggles, interethnic studies on Los Angeles history are ultimately helpful in making us aware of the stakes regarding racial and ethnic politics that are involved with this project. Through analysis of *Boyle Heights*, this thesis engages the exhibition in conversation with the two bodies of scholarly works on Los Angeles interethnicity. On the surface, it may appear that *Boyle Heights* is purely an effort to promote positive interethnic relations in the LA community, heighten appreciation for the virtues of ethnic diversity, and introduce a pan-ethnic identity in which residents of multiple races and bound together as first and foremost, neighbors of the Boyle Heights community. From the perspective of JANM and exhibition participants, this is a project that promoted a compelling portrait of a neighboring community and in the process, gave exhibition participants an exciting forum from which to present their stories. In turn, exhibition participants regarded the exhibition as an invaluable opportunity to pass on their legacy of cross-racial solidarity and give indispensable lessons to future generations.

The parties involved with the exhibition had the best intentions in trying to benefit the Boyle Heights community. Nonetheless, I assert that debates about the interconnectedness of statuses and socio-political fortunes between different ethnic groups are still extremely relevant to the *Boyle Heights*. Even though *Boyle Heights* wanted to focus solely on an uplifting portrait of local pan-ethnic identity, its decisions about what narratives to present and what strategies to invoke still created both positive and negative consequences that could have affected the statuses of members of different ethnic and racial groups. In order to understand how *Boyle Heights* plays into this matrix of influence, the concepts of model minority and model citizenship become critical.

During the 1960s, the figure of the model minority captured the attention of many American scholars and journalists. Most famously coined by journalist William Peterson in an article he wrote for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1966—titled “Success Story: Japanese American Style”—“model minority” was used to describe the stereotype of the submissive and successful Asian American (particularly Japanese Americans but also Chinese Americans). According to the model minority thesis, Asian Americans were successful in society because of their innate intelligence, law-abiding nature, and healthy respect for authority. Although JANM is outwardly critical of the model minority framework for its overly stereotypical nature and racist undertones,¹⁹ one can argue that the museum is still implicated in the model minority thesis due to the lingering influence

¹⁹ Most Asian American scholars today criticize the model minority thesis as inaccurate, stereotypical, and damaging. Some argued that the model minority thesis inaccurately subsumed all Asian American under the success label, disregarding certain groups such as Filipinos and Southeast Asians who still struggled with huge economic disadvantages. Others pointed out that notions of model minority only served to mask the lingering damage of white racism by framing Asian American success as proof that American meritocracy offered all groups equal opportunity—if Asian Americans were capable of “making it,” then other minorities had only themselves to blame for their social, economic, and political hardships.

of this concept on the Japanese American community for the last fifty years. Therefore, I claim that JANM was influenced by what historian Nayan Shah calls the “model citizenship” framework in its interpretation of interethnicity in Boyle Heights history. The model citizen, according to Shah was an irreproachable figure who operated along the dominant norms of society, culture, and politics.²⁰ The model citizen was a law-abiding, productive, and civically-minded individual who subscribed to heteronormative beliefs and engaged in all-American activities.²¹

I argue that on one hand that *Boyle Heights* utilizes the model citizenship framework to benefit not only Asian Americans but also members of different races and ethnicities—in this case, those who were represented as residents Boyle Heights. Historically speaking, minorities invoking the model citizenship framework have stood to benefit through increased access to political, social, and economic privileges in mainstream society. This is part of what Shah demonstrates. But as what Shah and also Molina demonstrate in their works, those labeled as outside the bounds of model citizenship are then denigrated, neglected, and denied access to valuable resources in society. I argue that *Boyle Heights* is implicitly aware of this and therefore attempted to subsume not only Asian Americans but also the other ethnicities portrayed in the exhibition under the umbrella of model citizenship, in effect bringing benefits to all the parties involved. Therefore, *Boyle Heights* is vested in expounding a positive narrative

²⁰ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1-16, 105-119.

²¹ Heteronormativity is the dominant social discourse that promotes gender relationships, sexual practices, family structures, and lifestyles associated with heterosexuality as the norm. Extending beyond the advocacy of heterosexuality, heteronormativity also works to affirm monogamous intimate relationships, traditional nuclear families, and the structuring of social institutions (i.e. schools, hospitals, social service organizations) around these concepts.

that presents community members as peaceable and productive citizens who engage in model behaviors—abiding the law, subscribing to heteronormativity, and embodying middle class working values. That is because successful deployment of such representations will prove simultaneously beneficial to all the different parties from JANM and Boyle Heights who were invested in the project. And in many ways, the exhibition was successful in accomplishing this task, as I explore in chapter one. Nonetheless, one must be mindful of the downside to this particular invocation of model citizenship to elevate the status of multiple ethnic groups; it is that individuals, groups, or events falling outside the norms of model citizenship must be silenced in history and consequently kept out of important political conversations.

Methodology and Thesis Layout

My thesis project began in the summer of 2008 when I spent many hours at JANM, not only as a researcher and interviewer, but also as a part-time employee. Having worked at JANM from 2003 to 2007, my intimate connections to the museum proved extremely helpful for the project. As a longtime employee, I had much greater ease of access to invaluable resources on *Boyle Heights*, including a wealth of archival material. My previous connection to the museum as a member of different exhibition teams also gave me the opportunity to collect information about the *Boyle Heights* project through key staff members who worked on the exhibition. Having worked alongside them through both uplifting times and arduous challenges, it was easier to engage in formal interviews or multiple informal conversations with them. This was especially true when it came to my conversations with Sojin Kim, curator of JANM, and others staff members who had helped conceptualize and project manage the *Boyle Heights* exhibition.

My interviews with JANM staff then led to additional opening of doors, as I suspect, given that several outside project participants had only agreed to interview with me after I told them that it was Sojin who had recommended them to me.

Ultimately when it came to conceptualizing my project, I decided to focus on analyzing two main bodies of information. For my first chapter, I chose to analyze the content of the *Boyle Heights* exhibition through the lens of community agency. Looking at photos, texts, artifacts, and design layouts of the exhibition, I examined all of them to ask “How did *Boyle Heights* attempt to bolster community agency and dignity for the residents of the neighborhood?” Chapter one focuses primarily on the positive impact that *Boyle Heights* had on public representations of the community. What were the key conceptual devices that *Boyle Heights* deployed in order to accomplish this goal, and why did these strategies exist?

In my second chapter, I rely on information drawn from another body of sources—oral history transcripts from the *Boyle Heights Project* as well as personal interviews I conducted with exhibition staff and participants. Although I argue in chapter one that *Boyle Heights* managed to heighten community dignity and agency through presentations of first-hand accounts in compelling, fascinating ways, I argue in chapter two that the same strategies responsible for the exhibition’s appeal also had the effect of silencing many important stories in community history. In this case, those silenced were those whose events and subjects fell outside norms of model citizenship. But in order to get at stories that were silenced in the exhibition, I could not rely on the exhibition itself for obvious reason. Instead, this was where I looked to oral history transcripts and interviews in which interviewees either revealed stories (on multiple occasions) which

were eventually kept off the exhibition or made it clear that the exhibition had consciously withheld certain stories and images from audiences. In looking at both positive and negative ramifications of decisions made surrounding the *Boyle Heights* project, I hope that my project ultimately sheds light and opens new avenues of conversations when it comes to the intricacies of complex power dynamics that racial groups must consider when seeking to elevate themselves. Many factors must be taken into account, given that any racial or ethnic group's efforts to raise their own status will inevitably create a multitude of positive and negative ripples for members of their own as well as other groups.

Chapter One

Boyle Heights: Giving a Community Its Voice and Dignity

Over the last five decades, popular culture and the media have depicted Boyle Heights as a hotbed of social vices such as gang violence, illegal immigration, and rampant poverty. As JANM curator Sojin Kim notes, “[Boyle Heights]...tends to enter the general public’s awareness when incidents such as Immigration and Naturalization Services sweeps or gang violence are covered in the news.”²² Indeed, such stereotypes of Boyle Heights emerged prominently in news coverage starting from the mid-1900s and also appeared in major motion pictures during the 1980s and 1990s. During the 1950s, articles on Boyle Heights in the *Los Angeles Times* spoke frequently of rising youth delinquency and violent gang fights wreaking havoc in the community. In subsequent decades, news coverage on Boyle Heights and East L.A. continued to push threatening images of gang violence to the forefront. As recently as 2008, CNN news anchor Anderson Cooper hosted an episode of *CNN Presents* titled “Homicide in Hollenbeck.” Calling the Hollenbeck District “the nation’s gang capital,” this investigative report painted a harrowing picture of a community besieged by relentless gang wars and featured story after story of gang members hopelessly ensnared in their bleak and dangerous lifestyles. At the same time, news coverage on illegal immigration, and films such as “Born in East L.A.,” (1987) “Stand and Deliver” (1988), and “My Family” (1995) helped sear the images of poverty, illegal immigration, and crime all into popular conceptions of East

²² Sojin Kim, “All Roads Lead to Boyle Heights: Exploring a Los Angeles Neighborhood,” in *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaborations*, eds. Akemi Kikumura, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and James A. Hirabayashi (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005), 149-150.

L.A. It is in this context that one must approach *Boyle Heights: The Power of Place*. In the public imagination, Boyle Heights is a frightening and disreputable place. However, the exhibit offered a different delineation of Boyle Heights—as a historical embodiment of ethnic and cultural diversity, strong commitment to civic participation, and determination to triumph over racism. Precisely how JANM and exhibit participants succeeded in giving audiences a favorable depiction of Boyle Heights despite the decades-long swirl of negative publicity occupies the focus of this chapter. On the surface, one might assume that *Boyle Heights* simply represents a series of propitious events and good intentions that came together in a timely manner—a museum set out to create an exhibit on Boyle Heights, enlist the enthusiastic participation of many community members, find a wealth of compelling material, foster an ethos of commitment and hard work that lasts three years, and open the exhibit to great reception and fanfare. All of this is indeed true; but to simply understand *Boyle Heights* this way only hints at the surface of what truly took place. This chapter shows that selective deployment of memory, images, and themes played a necessary role in what *Boyle Heights* ultimately looked like and how it reached affected audiences. This is because underneath *Boyle Heights*' inspirational stories of interethnic cooperation and civic activism is a slate of important issues regarding race, class, citizenship, power, and quality of life that lie at stake with the ultimate manifestation of the exhibit. Therefore, I argue that JANM envisioned *Boyle Heights* as an opportunity to legitimize itself as an institution that not only serviced the interests of Japanese Americans, but also those of other minority races in the city of L.A. In order to successfully accomplish this, JANM needed to garner support from the Boyle Heights neighborhood and convince all parties

that the exhibit would ultimately benefit Boyle Heights. As a result, JANM set out to cast the neighborhood in a positive light, a task it carried out by highlighting a particular time period in community history, imparting an agency and dignity to Boyle Heights that was previously missing, and portraying community members as model productive citizens.

Boyle Heights and the Recovery of Community History

Unlike the Boyle Heights that shows up most frequently in news reports, movies, and cultural stereotypes, the Boyle Heights featured in the exhibit did not include many stories on post-1960s Boyle Heights. As a result, *Boyle Heights* did not dwell on any images of gangs, poverty, or illegal immigration. Instead, the exhibit became a showcase on the lingering power of interethnic communal bonds, something it did by keeping the spotlight on 1920-1960, the heyday of Boyle Heights' noted ethnic and racial diversity.

Most histories of Boyle Heights begin with the year 1875 when the William H. Workman subdivided his property for residential development and changed the area's name from *Paredon Blanco* (White Bluffs) to Boyle Heights in honor of Andrew Boyle, previous owner of the property and father-in-law of Workman. Since Boyle Heights was geographically separated from downtown by the Los Angeles River, railroad systems and bridges were built over the next 20 years to connect the area to the rest of Los Angeles city, thereby encouraging new settlements.²³ Originally, many of these residents were wealthy Anglo-Protestants. However, starting from the early 1900s, increasing numbers of working class immigrants began to call Boyle Heights home and alter its demographic

²³ Sanchez, George, "Race and Immigration in Changing Communities: The Case of Boyle Heights," in *The Boyle Heights Oral History Project: A Multiethnic and Collaborative Exploration of a Los Angeles Neighborhood*, ed. Japanese American National Museum (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2002), 15.

composition. Serving as a “gateway” for newly-arrived immigrants, Boyle Heights proved attractive to many newcomers because it offered lower housing prices and proximity to downtown garment and food-packing factors where many ethnic individuals found work. In addition a complex matrix of zoning laws and restrictive covenants was instituted beginning in 1909, making most areas—those that were considered more desirable and upscale—exclusive to non-ethnic/Anglo Caucasians and off-limits to ethnic minority groups, including ethnic whites. As one of the few areas not governed by restrictive covenants and racial exclusion laws, Boyle Heights also became one of the few places in eastern and southern Los Angeles where immigrants and nonwhites could viably live. Between 1920 and 1960, the district of Boyle Heights would house a large population of Mexicans, Jews, and Russian Molokans. In addition, smaller communities of Japanese, Italians, Germans, Armenians, and African Americans, among other racial/ethnic groups, also moved into Boyle Heights. During this period, Boyle Heights became arguably the most diverse neighborhood in the nation.

This began to change during the 1950s and 1960s, as several factors contributed to transforming Boyle Heights into a predominantly Latino neighborhood. Although Mexican Americans had maintained large populations in the community dating all the way to the nineteenth century, it was during this time period that Boyle Heights became what Sanchez called “a classic ‘barrio’ with a population of poorer Chicano residents who were...subject to racial housing restrictions and economic discrimination.”²⁴

Displacement and resettlement of Japanese Americans during World War II had depleted the community of most Japanese Americans, who had chosen not to return after the war.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

In addition, a phenomenon known as “white flight” affected Boyle Heights when the outlaw of restrictive covenants in the late 1940s coupled with the improving economic station of many whites allowed such groups to relocate from previously ethnically diverse areas to wealthier white suburbs. In Boyle Heights, this resulted in the mass departure of Jews and other ethnic whites. As the years went on, Boyle Heights continued to serve as a gateway for immigration, but increasingly for Latinos. At the same time, each passing year saw numbers of incoming Latinos increase rapidly while those of other ethnicities decreased nearly as quickly.

Informed by public perceptions and stereotypes of the community, most people today only know Boyle Heights in its latest incarnation as a socioeconomically struggling barrio. This exhibition tried to change this by re-introducing to the public a previous episode in Boyle Heights. Therefore, the exhibition’s move to focus primarily on 1920s through 1960s Boyle Heights constitutes a type of “historical excavation,” bringing former residents back into their community, helping them re-trace their steps from a previous phase in their lives, and drawing out their personal images for public representation. In this capacity, the theme of interethnicity gave JANM a chance to not only articulate its historic link to Boyle Heights, but to also excite audiences, service the community, and preserve for posterity the neighborhood’s history of ethnic diversity.²⁵

Model Citizens and Agency

It is important in analyzing the historical and social contributions of *Boyle Heights* to consider not only the content presented in the exhibit, but to also study the

²⁵ Once JANM agrees to accept an artifact donation into its permanent collection—something it did for hundreds of *Boyle Heights* materials—it makes the commitment to preserve it for prosperity for the enjoyment of future audiences and researchers.

motivations and processes behind the acquisition of knowledge for this project. From a curatorial standpoint, *Boyle Heights* was conceptualized as a collaborative exhibition in which JANM solicited the input of exhibition advisors throughout every phase of the exhibition.²⁶ This does not deny that *Boyle Heights* was still curated by JANM, which had final say in making all of the exhibit's major decisions. However, JANM placed a high premium on trying to convey the multitude of first-hand accounts as accurately as possible, for the museum regarded itself as beholden to the opinions and needs of its source community. The museum was also constantly aware of the effects—both beneficial and harmful—that its representations could potentially have on Boyle Heights. All of these painstaking efforts most likely explain why the exhibition development process extended over two and a half years, leading up to the opening day of *Boyle Heights* as JANM staff made increasingly frequent trips and contacts with Boyle Heights to verify details and refine their artifact selections. In making sense of all the time and resources JANM spent on incorporating the voices and full support of its Boyle Heights advisory body, it is fitting to ask why was such an endeavor so important to JANM? And what were the issues concerning representation, community reputation, and citizenship that this project held at stake for both the museum and Boyle Heights?

²⁶ The collaboration-driven exhibit is a relatively recent approach to curation that has been gaining acceptance in the museum field ever since the 1960s. It is premised upon the notion that museums are not authoritarian institutions that operate by acquiring artifacts from their objects of study to produce official Truths and metanarratives for mass audiences. Such museums tended to adopt what museums scholars have termed the “one-way process,” in which their primary contact with source communities (or communities that they wanted to study) was to go in, extract the desired information, and leave. With the collaborative exhibition, the one-way process was replaced by a “two-way process” under which source communities were no longer regarded merely as “sources” but instead as important constituencies whose voices and opinions needed to be integrated into institutional practices and projects. As a result, museums adopting this approach embraced a sense of obligation and accountability towards their source community.

The answer to the first question revolves around the fact that JANM was striving to benefit Boyle Heights by granting community members *agency* in the telling of their own story. By agency, I am referring to JANM's project of allowing the Boyle Heights community to chronicle their own history in a way that is authentic and empowering both to themselves and to their neighborhood. In stark contrast to the negative portrayals of Boyle Heights and East L.A. produced by third parties (i.e. the mass media and government officials) who had little interest in preserving the integrity of personalized accounts of life in Boyle Heights, JANM wanted to produce an exhibit that would place the voices and interests of Boyle Heights members on center stage. And with the case of the exhibit, the voices that would shine through would be ones that were less well-known than contemporary depictions of Boyle Heights, yet more inspiring.

In expressing how many of the participants held for the exhibition hoped to use *Boyle Heights* as a platform to speak out against their community's negative image, Kim wrote that, "...people were motivated to participate because they perceived the project as a means for improving the neighborhood's public reputation. 'Sometimes you'll say you're from Boyle Heights and people will say, you poor thing. But they don't have a clue. Maybe this will clue them in.'²⁷ While popular perceptions had reduced Boyle Heights into a certain type of district that struck fear and apprehension upon mention of its name, current and former residents associated with the project were eager to present their own neighborhood in ways that dignified Boyle Heights as safe, ethnically diverse, culturally unique, and close-knit. But why was such a project important to them, and how

²⁷ Sojin Kim, "All Roads Lead to *Boyle Heights*: Exploring a Los Angeles Neighborhood," in *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaborations*, eds. Akemi Kikumura, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and James A. Hirabayashi (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005), 156.

might it actually impact their lives? In the following section, I posit that exhibition organizers and participants were in fact engaging in a political project regarding issues of national belonging and citizenship. Although the term citizenship is most frequently invoked as a legal status of national membership, the concepts of citizenship and national membership in much of the Western world also assumes that citizens possess unrestricted access to a nation's political, economic, and social privileges. As a result, all citizens can make claims of universal equality, equitable enjoyment of rights, and full belonging within a nation that is benevolent, always serving the best interests of its citizens, and fully vested in protecting its constituencies. While such a liberal democratic conception of citizenship and nation represents a hypothetical ideal, actual implementation of these principles is far more problematic.

Scholars across multiple academic disciplines have produced important works highlighting the fact that privileges of citizenship are frequently denied or circumscribed for large segments of the national populace, due to discrimination against race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and economic standing. In Ethnic Studies, for instance, many scholars have produced studies demonstrating that full privileges of U.S. citizenship are typically restricted to white males who occupy a certain level of economic standing and subscribe to heteronormative notions of domesticities and associations. Such discrepancies between the ideal and reality of citizenship is visible when applied to the lives of racialized residents in Los Angeles over the last one hundred years. While the negative depictions of contemporary Boyle Heights clearly concern issues of reputation, pride, and accuracy of information, they also have an impact on the socioeconomic standing of individuals with ties to Boyle Heights. In *Fit to Be Citizens?*, historian Natalia Molina analyzes

public health documents, newspaper articles, and court documents from early 1900s Los Angeles to argue that government officials responded to high rates of disease amongst the city's ethnic districts with programs and discourses that saw Mexican, Japanese, and Chinese immigrants as unsanitary disease carriers who were prone to over-breeding. Although the true cause of the epidemics lay in infrastructural neglect of racialized districts—minimal or nonexistent sewage systems, population overcrowding, and insufficient health facilities—the stereotypes gained a foothold in mainstream consciousness. They served to gloss over previous neglect of these areas and justify ongoing discrepancies in allocation of city resources.

From Molina's argument, what becomes evident is that discourses about ethnic LA residents as diseased and dirty ultimately restricted access of minority residents to basic city services. Indeed, Boyle Heights during the first half of the 1900s was also regarded as a zone of disease and susceptible to sanitation sweeps by the government.²⁸ Likewise in the case of contemporary Boyle Heights, the widespread delineation of community members as criminalized and pathologized denizens has helped to reinforce a decades-long pattern of city neglect towards this district. Indeed, Boyle Heights is widely acknowledged as a long-neglected area in Los Angeles, receiving a share of governmental resources that is disproportionate to its population, and frequently falling victim to governmental decisions that treat Boyle Heights as undesirable and dispensable.

²⁸ "Health Campaign Begun to Rid Area of Infectious Diseases," sec B, *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 1948. This was an article that appeared in the "Local News" section of the Los Angeles Times. It described an experimental project, "Operation Health—Boyle" in a 9-block section of Boyle Heights involving extensive efforts by the Community Health Association to rid the entire area of communicable diseases such as smallpox, diphtheria, whooping cough, and tuberculosis through vaccination, hygiene education, and sanitation programs.

From the 1910s through the 1940s, Boyle Heights was already being regarded as an undesirable section of town and lacking in social services, so much so that some residents took steps to create their own institutions, as was the case with the privately-owned Japanese Hospital. Then, as George Sanchez wrote, "...the instability of the population [a reference to rapidly changing demographics, white flight, and further decline in socioeconomic landscape] left Boyle Heights vulnerable to exploitation under the guise of 'development' during the 1940s and 1950s."²⁹ The construction of three public housing projects resulted not so much in improved living conditions for Boyle Heights, but in the traumatic displacement of hundreds of families from the area. But between 1943 and 1960, decisions were made by the City of Los Angeles and State of California, in spite of strong opposition from Boyle Heights residents, to construct five freeways that tore through the heart of the district. These freeways destroyed the cohesiveness of Boyle Heights by now parceling the area into several different chunks. Furthermore, the already-overcrowded community lost 10% of its land and had to cope with the displacement of over 10,000 residents and as well as increased crime and transience.

Given this legacy of criminalization, denigration, and denied resources that has long plagued Boyle Heights, the *Boyle Heights* exhibition is an attempt to address this situation by using community agency to dismantle the negative stereotypes against residents.³⁰ In addition, this process of incorporating personal voices and agendas into the

²⁹ Sanchez, George, "Race and Immigration in Changing Communities: The Case of *Boyle Heights*," in *The Boyle Heights Oral History Project: A Multiethnic and Collaborative Exploration of a Los Angeles Neighborhood*, ed. Japanese American National Museum (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2002), 12.

³⁰ By community agency, I refer to the process through which first-hand voices and political interests of community members are articulated and incorporated into historical narratives, public policies, and social movements.

exhibition can be interpreted as an attempt to portray Boyle Heights residents as worthy citizen subjects, which would ideally translate into increased respect, citizenship privileges, and access to state resources. I argue that through the *Boyle Heights* exhibit, both JANM and community participants are vested in representing members of the neighborhood as model citizens. As described in the thesis introduction, the model citizen is an individual who subscribes to proper behavioral and social norms. In the exhibit, the model citizen appears as Boyle Heights residents who are presented as members of society who are culturally adaptable to American norms, civically engaged, as peaceful and family-oriented, and faithful to middle-class values. The following sections of this chapter engage in an in-depth look at how subjects in *Boyle Heights* become personifications of model citizenship.

Community in Boyle Heights: The Power of Place

Even though the model citizen is an individual figure, fulfilling the expectations associated with this role requires the ability to exist harmoniously with fellow members of society. In this scheme, the concept of community and peaceful co-existence figures prominently in *Boyle Heights*. Incidentally, “community” is also an idea that has been heavily promoted by JANM in other exhibitions and projects. The following interpretation of community greets visitors to the museum’s centerpiece and permanent exhibition, *Common Ground: The Heart of A Community*:

“Most of us belong to a variety of communities—
Both communities of place and communities of spirit.

Community is not just where you live,
Community is about who you are.

Forming a community is a process,

It takes hard work and commitment.
Community is where your heart is...”

Although this definition of community appears in the *Common Ground* exhibit, it is fully applicable to *Boyle Heights*. For the two dimensions of community highlighted in *Common Ground* articulates how community was conceived in *Boyle Heights* and how this concept was then applied to heighten the neighborhood’s overall appeal. First, the text panel describes community as it is most conventionally understood, as a physical and geographical locality that is home to a sizeable number of people. Second, the panel also expands the traditional definition of community beyond physical manifestations. As expressed by the phrases linking community to the heart and spirit, community in *Common Ground* encompasses the powerful sense of belonging that emerges when deep connections are forged between people who share important commonalities such as race, creed, nation, and residences. In articulating both of these definitions, JANM also frames community in ways that are clearly celebratory and sentimental. This particular depiction of community helps lay the groundwork for the model citizenship discourse to pulsate through JANM’s exhibitions such as *Common Ground* and *Boyle Heights*. For a community boasting physical landscapes, histories, and residents worth celebrating and remembering, it must be assumed that residents co-exist harmoniously and productively, behaving in ways deemed acceptable and admirable in society.

In *Boyle Heights*, conceptions of community support its representation of model citizenship. This is apparent in studying how the intersection motif is used in the exhibit to convey community, model citizenship, and sentimentality all at once. As articulated in *Boyle Heights*’ introductory text panel, “Boyle Heights is a Los Angeles intersection, a

place of infinite possibilities where the paths of many people cross and connect. It has been home to people who have come to Los Angeles from multiple cities, states, and countries, whose beliefs and traditions are varied, and who speak different languages.” This intersection metaphor is enacted in practical, literal, and symbolic ways. In the practical sense, the *Boyle Heights* gallery space was made to resemble a series of intersections bearing street sign replicas that referenced actual street corners in Boyle Heights. From an installation design perspective, these intersections served as a technique of dividing the exhibition into nine thematic sections, directing audience flow, and—when the gallery was busy—creating a sense of a bustling yet intimate cityscape.

But in addition to serving as an installation design technique, the intersection motif is central to the exhibit’s literal and conventional notion of community. Throughout text panels and exhibit materials, much of the appreciation surrounding historic Boyle Heights is anchored in a “sense of place,” or lingering ties to the unique sights, sounds, landmarks, and spatial environment that make up the physical neighborhood. There is a section—Section Five, called “The Heart of the Eastside”—that is especially dedicated to remembering the sights and sounds of Brooklyn Avenue and Soto Street, commonly regarded by Boyle Heights residents to be the community hub of historic, bygone years. Therefore, the constructed gallery intersections and historic street images all carried tremendous sentimental weight on the basis of Boyle Heights residents’ joy upon recognition of these streets and sights as familiar social and business hubs. Such fondness for sights and sounds of Boyle Heights helps intensify feelings of admiration and appreciation towards the community. These evocations also simultaneously detracts from the pervasive images of East LA as a run-down, indigent district because also the photos

and reconstructions of *Boyle Heights* streets depict images of clean streets, neighborhood shops, tranquil parks, and cheerful schools.

Besides enabling audiences re-imagine a Boyle Heights that is beautiful and comfortable, the intersection theme communicated the exhibition's more symbolic and metaphorical notions of community. On one hand, it is true that conceptions of physical and affective community go inextricably together in the exhibit because so much of the sentimentality for *Boyle Heights* is rooted in a sense of place, and lingering affection for a physical space. This is evident in reading the introductory text panel of "The Heart of the Eastside" section:

The corner where Cesar E. Chavez Avenue intersects Soto Street is the heart of the Eastside. Pulsating with a constant flow of pedestrian traffic, it is a crossroads, the symbolic and social center of Boyle Heights's neighborhood life. People have congregated here for generations to shop, dine, rally, and celebrate. They pass one another daily on their way to work, to school, to the bus stop, often pausing to catch up on the news with friends and neighbors.

However, as the above text also suggests, community is so much more than place. As made apparent in the outpouring of sentiment over *Boyle Heights*, the bonds and sense of community formed over historic Boyle Heights have the capacity to transcend time and space. In other words, the Boyle Heights community is not only a rich and compelling landscape, but a symbol of wonderful memories, powerful bonds, and important events lasting to the present day, regardless of Boyle Heights' present plight and dispersal of former residents. As with the case of the physical landscape of Boyle Heights, the exhibit's commemoration of Boyle Heights' symbolic community and lasting bonds includes a testament to the presence of model citizenship in the neighborhood.

Interethnicity and Model Citizenship

Nowhere does model citizenship and symbolic community converge more powerfully than through the use of intersection to invoke Boyle Heights as a paragon of interethnicity and cross racial, cross-ethnic contact. Not only does interethnicity give audiences something special to celebrate about Boyle Heights, it also feeds into the popular discourse of multiculturalism which envisions the productive coming-together of many different races, each co-existing peacefully in a “melting pot.” What makes this vision relevant to model citizenship is that members of this melting pot are cast as productive and beneficial to society, capable of living together harmoniously, forming a viable and self-sustaining community, and not causing trouble through acts of crime. As I will show in my analysis of intersections and interethnicity in *Boyle Heights*, the exhibition constituted a powerful forum for associating worthiness, model behaviors, and multiculturalism to the Boyle Heights community.

The tropes of intersections and interethnicity are evoked through the exhibit’s decision to organize itself around themes. Within each of the sections, a different range of races and ethnicities are featured in order to convey the ethnic and cultural diversity of the community’s historic population. In other words, within each “intersectional” space in the gallery, a figurative intersection is enacted through the photos and artifacts which overwhelmingly denote cross-ethnic interactions and paralleled lives.

To further understand how the notions of metaphorical intersection and interethnicity are actualized in the exhibit, it is also helpful to examine the scheme and content of one section. For instance, Section One, titled “All Roads Lead to Boyle Heights” provides a brief overview of Boyle Heights history and sets out to frame Boyle

Heights as a neighborhood that has always served as an entry point for newcomers and immigrants. In particular during the early twentieth century, Boyle Heights' status as a gateway for immigrants resulted in tremendous ethnic and racial diversity for the community. To illustrate this last point, the first section presents photographs of twenty-four mostly black-and-white images of Japanese American, African American, Mexican American, Russian American, and Jewish families. Some were studio portraits, while others were informal photos of families posing in front of their residences and communities. A number of the photos showed family members from multiple generations, while others only had family members from the same generation. But what all these photos demonstrated in their collectivity was that families of different ethnicities all raised their families in Boyle Heights and had parallel experiences of living together, having children, getting married, and making friends. Similar display techniques were also employed in other sections of *Boyle Heights* showing juxtaposed images of different ethnic/racial residents attending their respective religious services (i.e. Japanese Americans attending Buddhist services and church, Mexican Americans attending Catholic services, Jews visiting the synagogue), and engaging in business life as well as quotidian and recreational activities. Although these images do not always show actual interaction between the different races and ethnicities, their strategic placement—alongside each other according to parallel themes—conveys to exhibition audiences a powerful affect of solidarity, shared experiences, and communal bonding.

While interethnicity is illustrated through the strategic juxtaposition of photographs showing different ethnic and racial groups engaged in similar activities, it is also conveyed outright through photographs that show interactions between individuals

of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Although in purely quantitative terms they number less than “mono-ethnic” photographs, cross-ethnic photos feature in many sections of *Boyle Heights* and reinforce the prominent notion of multiethnicity and interethnicity already conveyed through text panels and parallel placement of images with only one race or culture. In accordance with the prevalent scholarly understanding of interethnic relations in California and Los Angeles during the early to mid-1900s, most of the exhibition photos showing cross-ethnic interactions featured residents who were second-generation immigrants or younger. Historian Allison Varzally has noted that second-generation youth were generally more inclined to form cross ethnic bonds with the peers than their first-generation immigrant parents, due to the fact that they attended schools together, shared more similar cultural backgrounds through their efforts at Americanization, had therefore more opportunities to socialize and unlike their parents, did not face linguistic barriers or hold on as tightly to home-country allegiances.³¹ In *Boyle Heights*, I counted approximately thirty-five photographs on interethnicity, of which thirty featured residents who were youths and young adults who came of age during the “second-generation immigration” era of the 1940s or later. Most depicted the youths in group photos from schools, in social and recreational activities, or in cultural appreciation activities. Some of these photos were class photos from Boyle Heights’ elementary, middle, and high schools which boasted a large mix of ethnicities; some showed children, teenagers, and adults dressed in ethnic garb for annual International

³¹ Allison Varzally, *Making a Non-White California: Californians Coloring outside Ethnic Lines, 1925-1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 47-71.

Day Parades initiated in the 1920s by the International Institute; and others showed youths of different races simply “hanging out” and having a good time.

One can certainly argue *Boyle Heights*’ narrative of different races coming together, forming friendships, and establishing a vibrant, thriving community is compelling and productive to cultivating a favorable image of Boyle Heights based in notions of model citizenship. One must also note that *Boyle Heights*’ emphasis on interethnicity stands out and appeals to audiences because only particular types of multiethnic bonding and community formations are covered in the exhibition—those that are productive, positive, and also appealing to exhibition audiences.

Productive Citizens in *Boyle Heights*

While interethnicity infused an ethnic dimension to *Boyle Heights*’ construction of the model citizen, additional photographs implied that residents of the community not only got along in spite of color line division, but also engaged in a series of upstanding, laudable behaviors that contrast present-day images of gangsters and illegals overtaking the neighborhood. Many photos depict the residents engaging in a series of productive, law-abiding, All-American, and innocuous activities. For instance, Section Four, titled “Faith in the Community,” focuses on the plentiful and diverse religions that brought many Boyle Heights residents together in devout and peace-loving congregation. Imbuing religious activities with productive and community-building overtones, the text panel of the section notes, “Houses of worship provide evidence of Boyle Heights’s past and present religious diversity...In addition to offering spiritual support, these religious institutions nurture communities and provide practical services to members and the neighborhood at large.” To illustrate how religions “nurture community,” this section

then displays numerous photos of residents enthusiastically participating in religious services and happily posing in group photos of large congregations. The message through these images is clear that religion serves as a powerful force for bringing together large segments of the community, uniting them around their faith, and cultivating support networks based on friendship and religious support. Emphasizing the fact that such religious activities are not only beneficial to individuals but also productive for the community, many of the pictures then illuminate outreach and social service projects sponsored by religious institutions. Group photos of staff/members from Maryknoll Sisters' Home (a convent, orphanage, and elementary school that served Boyle Heights' Japanese American Catholic residents), St. Mary's Church (the neighborhood's oldest Catholic parish and important advocate for Boyle Heights Latino residents), and Tenrikyo Mission Headquarters (a Shinto organization that promoted Japanese culture in Boyle Heights) all attest to the positive impact of religious institutions in the community.

In addition to religious activities, Boyle Heights residents in the exhibition are also depicted as productive and civically-engaged citizens in other settings. Section Eight titled "Growing up on the East Side," is noteworthy because it focuses on the recreational and socializing activities of Boyle Heights' youth. Children and teenagers are seen in the photos as going off to school, participating in school or community-sponsored sports activities, attending prom, belonging to the Boy Scouts, or engaged in cultural activities (i.e. Japanese dance and kendo classes). Rather than images of rebellious gangs or youths embracing marginalized "non-American" cultural behaviors, young residents of Boyle Heights appear in clean-cut attire as fun-loving individuals, and always in joyful interactions with friends.

This particular perspective is important because Boyle Heights youth have been the target of much of the negative publicity directed against the community. During the 1940s, “zoot suiters”—mostly Mexican American youth, but also African American, and Asian American youth—incited widespread consternation over their penchant for a particular fashion aesthetic which was quickly associated with youth rebellion and juvenile delinquency.³² Following the Zoot Suit Riots and the end of World War II, anxieties over youth delinquency were quickly parlayed from the zoot suiter figure to the criminal gangster.³³ Stories of violent Latino gangs in Boyle Heights began circulating in the 1950s with increasing intensity amongst major press outlets. It was during this period that the *Los Angeles Times* began covering the subjects of gang violence with increasing frequency starting from the zoot suit riots and continuing well into the 1970s. It notably dedicated a six-part series from December 16-21, 1953 to analyzing the proliferation of East Los Angeles gangs and attributing their rising participation in crime to poverty,

³² Major works on Los Angeles zoot suiters and the Zoot Suit Riots include *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* by Luis Alvarez, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* by Mauricio Mazón, and *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon : Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* by Eduardo Obregón Pagán. Also worth mentioning is the famous 1979 play, *Zoot Suit*, by Luis Valdez, which was adapted into a 1981 film of the same title.

³³ On the evening of June 3, 1943, approximately fifty sailors from the U.S. Navy embarked on a rampage in downtown Los Angeles to attack any civilian who was unfortunate to be seen wearing a zoot suit, popular form of attire characterized by a colorful and oversized jacket, baggy and tapered pants, a broad-rimmed hat, and certain accessories such as watch chains hanging out of the pocket. (Zoot suits were especially popular among Latino, African American, Filipino, and Japanese American youth in urban areas during the 1930s and 1940s.) Over the course of the following week, violence escalated with hundreds of more sailors pouring into East and South Central Los Angeles, areas which were primarily populated by Mexican Americans. Taxi drivers offering sailors and soldiers free rides into riot areas while the Los Angeles Police Department and the U.S. military looked on. Many Mexican and African American youths took part in the violence by retaliating or by sometimes initiating their own assaults against the sailors. The mainstream press in Los Angeles was quick to criminalize the predominantly-Latino zoot suiters by portraying them as juvenile delinquents responsible for the riots.

inadequate family upbringing, social ostracism among peers, and emotional problems.³⁴ With such negative impressions of Boyle Heights residents and community taking a foothold in public impressions, the exhibition prominently highlighted a different perspective on the traumatic events of World War II and their impact on Boyle Heights youth.

While the rise in press coverage on Boyle Heights gangs was sparked by the negative discourses surrounding the outbreak of Zoot Suit Riots in the midst of wartime urban America, *Boyle Heights* actually utilized the events of World War II as a direct counter-argument against prevailing perceptions on the Boyle Heights youth problem. This is most evident in Section Six—“World War II: ‘To Solve the World’s Problems,’”—which offered the exhibition’s interpretation of the war’s impact on Boyle Heights. The prevailing narrative on America’s collective efforts during World War II illustrates a heroic generation of youths who—as epitomized famously in broadcast journalist Tom Brokaw’s influential bestseller, *The Greatest Generation*—stood up in the face of adversity to fight valiantly in the battlefield, contributed invaluable civilian services at home and abroad, and in the process, earned a permanent place in national lore. If the *Los Angeles Times*’ wartime coverage of the Boyle Heights community and subsequent popular perceptions of East LA serve any indication, the American public over the years has clearly viewed Boyle Heights residents outside the narrative of this powerful wartime myth. What *Boyle Heights* set out to do then, was to highlight a

³⁴ Bob Will, “Chest Group Acts on Youth Gangs: Real Solution Lies in Homes but Social Program Helps Out,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1953.

compelling portrait of Boyle Heights youth refuted long-held negative stereotypes on youth gangs and criminals, and did so in a truly dramatic way as to write these youths directly into the center of America's reverence for the World War II generation.

While popular notions of Boyle Heights youth conjured up gangsters and teenaged delinquents, Section Six of the exhibition highlighted images of young Boyle Heights residents who contributed in the wartime effort and fulfilled their duties as members of not just the Boyle Heights community but of their nation. Many of the photos had young Mexican American, Jewish, African American, and Russian American men and women enlistees posing in uniform with family and friends (presumably on home trips during furloughs). In one particularly compelling photograph of Boyle Heights youth war effort, the youths themselves are actually not even shown in the picture. Instead, Mexican American couple Jessie and Jose Jurado stand before their front window where a small military flag with six stars is visible. It turns out that each fabric star was sewn onto the flag to represent one son serving in the military. Despite not showing the actual presence of the six brothers in uniform, their "presence" through the stars combined with their physical absence—given that they were all away at war during the time of the photo—offered perhaps the most powerful embodiment of military valor and model citizenship in the entire exhibition. While many residents opted to enlist, others are shown as contributing to the war effort through fundraising/charity events such as bond sales and clothing campaigns for Jewish survivors in Europe.

Model behaviors by youth are depicted not only through images of military service and national loyalty, but interestingly, through situations of protest and conflict. Here, *Boyle Heights* offers a rendition of model citizenship which diverges from Shah's

conception, but nonetheless, still portrays the exhibition subjects as law abiding and civically engaged citizens. In his account Japanese American draft resisters in *Free to Die for Their Country*, legal historian Eric Muller argues that by resisting their call to military service, the Japanese American draft resisters of World War II actually fulfilled their citizenship responsibilities by taking a stand against the violation of their constitutional rights on behalf of themselves and their Japanese American brethren.^{35 36} Although such individuals were derided as disruptive and defiant elements during their time, subsequent scholarship has shed new light on them, delineating them as courageous individuals who stood up to society in the face of injustice. Identifying the restoration of rights for their peers and community as their motive for protests, these people demonstrated a willingness to endure personal hardships for the sake of a higher purpose.

Boyle Heights adopts this point of view and features several additional photos and narratives that fall along the lines of this particular take of model citizenship. (However, such delineations are less frequent and prominent than ones in accordance with Shah's framework discussed in the introduction.) Under the protest/resistance framework of model citizenship, Boyle Heights residents are seen as refusing to passively accept injustices or unfavorable conditions, instead choosing to protest in peaceful, collaborative, and often interethnic ways. Rather than passively submitting to racism or constitutional violations, many of the Boyle Heights residents in the exhibit mobilized to

³⁵ Eric Muller, *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of Japanese American Draft Resisters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

³⁶ "Resisters" refers to Japanese American men who became draft resisters during their World War II internment in Japanese American concentration camps. Calling for an end to their unconstitutional incarceration, draft resisters demanded the release of Japanese Americans from concentration camps as a condition for their military service. See Muller's book-- *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of Japanese American Draft Resisters*—for a fuller account of the resisters.

assert their rights as U.S. citizens and regain control over aspects of their lives for the sake of themselves and their community. Viewers of the exhibition can see that during the midst of World War II, youth in the community not only served in the military, but also organized demonstrations in front of the board of education to protest a Polytechnic High School speech invitation extended to anti-Semite Gerald Smith and demonstrated in front of a theater to raise awareness of Nazi persecutions. Through the lens of model citizenship and in the context of the *Boyle Heights* exhibition, activities such as these are all described as noble because residents stood up to various governmental injustices in ways that were widely regarded as acceptable (in this case, it was nonviolent, socially informed protest demonstrations) and in the process asserted their own worthiness as citizens and selflessly fought to extend greater rights and dignity to other victimized groups.

Summary

During a reflective piece written after the completion of *Boyle Heights*, Kim alluded to a longtime sense of frustration and neglect that the Boyle Heights community felt against their government and mainstream culture. Opening Kim's article was a powerful statement by neighborhood activist and priest, Father Pedro Villarroya: "There are a million people east of the river. You'd think that Los Angeles ends at the Los Angeles River—that the river is the border of another world. You cut us out of your picture. But we are there. We are human beings. We are part of Los Angeles. We are part of America."³⁷ In many ways, *Boyle Heights* stands as a direct response to this lingering

³⁷ Sojin Kim, "All Roads Lead to *Boyle Heights*: Exploring a Los Angeles Neighborhood" in *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaborations*, eds. Akemi

and valid dissatisfaction expressed by Father Villarroya. For many people, Boyle Heights remains an invisible and neglect community, cut off from the rest of LA and hardly worthy of mention in conversations about the city. For many others, the only time Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles are worth discussion are when issues regarding their crime rates and gang activities raised as nuisances and sources of panic for people living within Los Angeles and for the general public. In this chapter, I assert that *Boyle Heights*—in order to combat lingering stereotypes of Boyle Heights as an impoverished barrio home to nefarious activities such as crime and illegal immigration—utilized the concepts of model citizenship and community to present a dignified portrait of the neighborhood. In the process, the exhibit also brought to light first-hand stories and voices that had previously been neglected in histories and public discourses surrounding the neighborhood.

Chapter Two

Mining the Silences in *Boyle Heights*

Many people drawn to the Boyle Heights project were invested in elaborating on and promoting a particular memory of past community life. And it was their stories—which spoke of a tolerant, supportive, diverse community (versus one that reflected conflict of prejudice) in the 1930s and 1940s—that were shared on record or in public forums.

--Curator Sojin Kim³⁸

The tangible past is altered mainly to make history conform with memory. Memory not only conserves the past but adjusts recall to current needs...Memory transforms the past we have known into what we think it should have been. Selective recall eliminates undesired scenes, highlights favored ones, and makes them tidy and suitable.

--David Lowenthal³⁹

The previous chapter examined how the exhibition themes of interethnicity, citizenship, and community helped heighten public appreciation for Boyle Heights. The exhibit also bolstered the agency of community residents in their efforts to promote an affirming, empowering narrative of Boyle Heights. While the exhibition was successful in garnering positive media attention on the community and inspiring residents to share personal accounts of life in historical Boyle Heights, one must also understand that the exhibition had to make conscious decisions to highlight certain stories and themes over others. As geographer David Lowenthal noted, memories operate not so much by conjuring up comprehensive, all-encompassing recollections of the past, but by somehow

³⁸ Sojin Kim, "All Roads Lead to Boyle Heights: Exploring a Los Angeles Neighborhood," in *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaborations*, eds. Akemi Kikumura, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and James A. Hirabayashi (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005), 156.

³⁹ David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Past Place: Landscape and Memory." *Geographical Review* 65 (1971):21.

interpreting and remembering past events in particular ways to fulfill present needs. Since *Boyle Heights* is a project that revolves around the construction of historical memory and narration, Lowenthal's statement is certainly applicable to the exhibition.

Powerful stories which complement the needs and goals at hand are highlighted, reproduced, and widely disseminated. On the flip side however, undesirable events and memories failing to conform to present needs are re-shaped or filtered out. The overarching narrative of the *Boyle Heights* exhibition delineated a peaceful multicultural community comprised of citizens who got along with one another and engaged in productive and model behaviors. However, efforts by the exhibition to depict Boyle Heights as a peaceful, historical and multicultural community required the excision of any stories contradicting this perspective. Also not included were narratives by individuals in historic Boyle Heights who did not bolster the exhibition's theme of model citizenship. While I examined the visible, highlighted stories of *Boyle Heights* in the previous chapter, I devote this chapter to stories that were erased from the exhibition. I identify and analyze three prominent themes that exhibition participants and organizers knew about, but downplayed; they are stories of interethnic conflict, discussions of intraethnic tensions associated with cross-racial romance, and images of "criminal" elements that might affirm negative gangster images of East LA. I also ponder, what is there to be accomplished or made possible by withholding these narratives? And why were so many parties in the exhibition reluctant to discuss them?

Citizenship, Memory, and Amnesia

Finding the answers to these questions is important not only for the sake of broadening one's understanding of the Boyle Heights exhibition, but also to increase our

awareness of how constructions of citizenship—who is and who isn't deserving of belonging in the nation's social, political, and economic fabric—hinge on selective deployment of both memory and amnesia. In his book, Nayan Shah showed that model citizenship operated by celebrating Chinese Americans who had embraced middle-class norms in consumer tastes, education, economic stability, respectable domesticity, and proper conduct.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, efforts to highlight only the Chinatown residents who fit into the model citizen model posed negative consequences for the Chinese population that did not fit the middle class, heteronormative subject being celebrated—they were notably silenced in public discourses.⁴¹ Although Shah's work relates to specific events in 1950s San Francisco, his argument helps shed light on the model citizen discourse in *Boyle Heights*. Stories of non-model behaviors, events, and figures were left out of the exhibit, and representations that contradicted the exhibition's depictions of a harmonious multiethnic community were also not included.

A Note on Methodology

Since the exhibition itself did not include stories and subjects that challenged upbeat depictions of Boyle Heights community life, I turned to sources outside the exhibition in order to identify such information. I rely primarily on transcripts of oral histories conducted by curator Sojin Kim and other members the *Boyle Heights* team during the information-gathering process. JANM had sponsored these oral histories in order to obtain stories and first-hand accounts that could be incorporated into the

⁴⁰ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 13-16.

⁴¹ For instance, bachelors who were homeless found themselves written out of visibility and social membership by the Chinese American community itself.

exhibition. Between 1999 and 2002, the exhibition team interviewed twenty-five current and former—mostly former—residents from the community. Interviewees were given a brief introduction into the interethnic nature of *The Boyle Heights Project* and then asked to share their memories of life in Boyle Heights and elaborate on a variety of subjects, including childhood experiences, racial dynamics in the community, World War II years, and changes in the community over the last fifty years. Interviewees were selected to represent a wide range of ethnicities, a wealth of decades-long knowledge, and exciting yet representative experiences on community history. These interviews are valuable to researchers because they cover nuances of community life in greater depth than what was possible in the context of the exhibition. Creating the exhibition was only possible by synthesizing certain images, stories and artifacts into a coherent and streamlined gallery display that reinforced one primary overarching theme. Compared to having visitors read oral histories, the exhibit gave audiences the opportunity to view greater numbers of individuals, personal memories, and images in one sitting. However, what oral history transcripts contained were extensive passages that offered far greater degrees of candor and detail about life in Boyle Heights.

My approach to analyzing these oral histories is to compare them to the information presented in the exhibition—I look for what information was ultimately included, and which stories were ultimately excluded? Working with the knowledge that exhibition organizers participated in these oral histories and were consistently aware of the information provided through these interviews, one can mine oral histories for prominent themes and recurring narratives that were available to the exhibition team, but eventually downplayed. Therefore, my approach in analyzing oral histories alongside

other sources on Boyle Heights history compiled by the exhibition team (i.e. historical and contemporary second-hand accounts of Boyle Heights neighborhood life) is to look for discrepancies between the information offered through these sources and the information that eventually ended up in the exhibition.

One value of using oral histories and exhibition development materials is that they enable me to access one level of memory erasure—available and articulated memories erased during the transition from exhibition development to exhibition presentation. To the credit of JANM, exhibition organizers have made a significant amount of material not covered in the exhibition (yet still relevant to Boyle Heights history) available to the public. The wealth of material gathered during exhibition collection phases can be accessed by any professional or amateur researcher wishing to view, provided they make an appointment with the museum’s resource center. The oral histories transcripts are more accessible, since their viewing at the resource center does not require any appointment. On top of everything, JANM has been honest in stating that the exhibit does not comprise a comprehensive history of Boyle Heights, and has made efforts to include “more balanced” scholarly articles in exhibit publications and sponsor public programs aimed at exploring topics not covered in the exhibit.

Despite the fact that JANM has made several “excised” materials available to the public, they still contain one limitation for a researcher interested in examining the points of silence in the exhibit. These materials do not provide information silenced by the “original” sources themselves. For instance, it is certain that interviewees withheld information—either consciously or subconsciously—on Boyle Heights from interviewers during the oral history sessions. Transmitting every single memory and every iota of

knowledge on Boyle Heights is simply impossible to do in one interview, or even several for that matter. In addition, memories are tenuous that whenever they constructed or communicated; the possibility always exists for details and sentiments to be altered or forgotten. Cultural critic Norman Klein once stated that “In order to remember, something must be forgotten...When one recalls a memory, one is also simultaneously forgetting to some degree, or effacing another memory.”⁴² Therefore, it is true that using the methodology of studying the oral histories enables me to pinpoint stories that exhibition organizers willingly omitted from *Boyle Heights*. One must nonetheless acknowledge that there are still many silenced stories which this thesis cannot access that were withheld from the exhibition organizers themselves.

Interethnic Conflicts and Tensions

This awareness that memories operate in complex ways helps inform our examination of one notable theme that emerged through oral histories but did not end up in the exhibition—the topic of interethnic and cross-racial conflicts that took place during the historical period covered by the exhibition. Amidst the exhibition’s efforts to depict historical Boyle Heights as an admirable multiethnic community, this became the most obvious theme that was excised. It would be tempting to argue that the removal of negative interethnic interactions from the exhibition was a result of JANM’s overpowering choice to convey one particular vision of Boyle Heights—as a peaceful, productive, and multicultural community—that complemented its own mission and served to bolster the institution’s present-day reputation as a promoter of collaborative

⁴² Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso 1997), 13-14

relationships across different ethnicities. While it is true that JANM shaped the narrative of *Boyle Heights* to conform to its institutional mission, one must also consider that exhibition participants themselves were often uncomfortable discussing the subject of interracial tensions. Reflecting on her experiences as curator of Boyle Heights, Sojin Kim wrote that, “On two occasions when people were more candid in their discussions of community life and described race-based antagonisms, they later requested that we not include their remarks on record—aware that their views and versions were contrary to the more popular narrative of interracial harmony and concerned that they might be perceived as racist.”⁴³

It is highly unlikely that individuals were ever informed by exhibition organizers or fellow community advisors that such topics on community history would be off-limits. In fact, JANM’s exhibition team consistently demonstrated a willingness throughout the information-gathering phase to explore issues that caused conflicts within the Boyle Heights community during the early and mid-twentieth century. During its 2000 Boyle Heights Community Forum—which was organized to document a wide range of recollections of Boyle Heights from former and current residents—JANM asked attendees the question: What are some of the [community] issues and/or activities that divide or unify people?⁴⁴ Despite JANM’s call for discussion on the issues and activities that divided the community, few current and former residents were enthusiastic about elaborating on this subject.

⁴³ Sojin Kim. “All Roads Lead to Boyle Heights: Exploring a Los Angeles Neighborhood” in *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaborations*, eds. Akemi Kikumura, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and James A. Hirabayashi (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005), 156-157

⁴⁴ Japanese American National Museum, “Community Forum: Discussion topics.” Internal document.

In light of the fact that there were hesitations over open discussions of race-based community conflicts, oral history interviewees sometimes tried to put off elaborating on this subject. In the twelve *Boyle Heights* oral histories that I examined, six contained references to community tensions rooted in racial or ethnic differences; all except one treated this subject with terseness.⁴⁵ As a scholar trying to make sense of the silences on interethnic frictions, I had the choice of reading the oral histories either with the grain or against the grain. To read historical evidence and narratives “with the grain” would mean to take the silences at face value and interpret them as indications that interethnic relations in Boyle Heights simply didn’t exist and that community relations were always as positive and unproblematic as depicted in the exhibition and oral histories. To read the oral histories (and also the exhibition) against the grain however, would mean to analyze these narratives with eye for moments of silences, gaps, and inconsistencies, and to ask why certain information is either being withheld.⁴⁶ My method is to read the narratives of Boyle Heights against the grain and ask why Boyle Heights residents have always felt compelled to emphasize a positive, upbeat portrait of community relations.

Given the host of pressures stemming from racism and poverty that Boyle Heights residents have historically faced, it seems unlikely that interethnic relations have always been seamless and free from internal tensions. During my interview with Howard Shorr—a project consultant for *Boyle Heights* and former history teacher at Roosevelt High School—expressed doubts as to the reality of a problem-free Boyle Heights:

⁴⁵ The six interviews that mentioned interethnic tensions were those with Kate (Shubin) Bolotin, Ruth (Fujii) Brandt, Hershey Eisenberg, Leo Frumkin, Eddie Ramirez, and James Alex Tolmasov. Ramirez was the most vocal interviewee on the subject of interethnic tensions.

⁴⁶ Stoler, Ann, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2.1 (2002).

When I interviewed people, there was a tendency to talk about a very romantic view of Boyle Heights during the 1930s...How could you go through the Great Depression? They would say there was no racism...With the way Boyle Heights [history] is treated today, it's highly romanticized. It's a very poor neighborhood. It's even poorer today. There are a lot of problems and a lot of issues...There has been that tendency, to romanticize it, and it's been an interesting battle.⁴⁷

In a separate interview that I conducted with another project consultant, longtime community resident Albert Johnson also raised similar questions on the tendency of Boyle Heights residents to talk about their community in purely glowing terms:

When I first started working [the *Boyle Heights Project*] I kind of came to it with rose-colored glasses. And I noticed something about the focus groups. I didn't hear a lot of negativity, but a lot of "We were all living together and we all got along so well and there was no prejudice and there was no racism." Then I started thinking back, and I really started doing some thinking about my experience there. I thought, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Maybe it wasn't all as idyllic as people are kind of portraying it.

Given these revelations by Shorr and Johnson, it becomes apparent that conceptions of Boyle Heights as an idyllic multicultural community is firmly ingrained in many residents. Their statements, however, also raise the possibility that something was going on, that interethnic conflicts did take place, but that they weren't being talked about openly. Kim acknowledged in our interview that interethnic conflicts did occur in Boyle Heights, but that exploring such stories in the exhibit was a difficult and risky task, and that "it would have not been responsible to present these in an exhibition."⁴⁸ Indeed, this statement makes sense considering the highly public nature of the exhibition medium coupled with JANM's commitment to protecting the integrity of Boyle Heights' public representation. Although the interviewees for *Boyle Heights* oral histories often

⁴⁷ Howard Shorr, telephone interview with the author, August 15, 2008.

⁴⁸ Sojin Kim, telephone interview with the author, July 20, 2008.

sidestepped discussion of interethnic tensions, there were still moments when some of them revealed information on interethnic conflicts from the 1920s through 1960s. For the most part, the oral histories followed a similar progression when approaching the subject of community tensions or cross-racial apprehensions. During the outset of each of these oral histories, interviewees articulate the view later presented by the exhibition that community relations, particularly interethnic ones, were peaceful and productive. Interviewees Atoy Wilson, James Alex Tolmasov (Russian/Molokan American) and Hershey Eisenberg (Jewish American) spoke at length about friends of different races and ethnicities, particularly during childhood years in school and well into adulthood through the military, multiethnic political collaborations, and living in the same neighborhood. Statements extolling the virtues of growing up in a culturally and ethnically diverse neighborhood—picking up different languages, learning how to appreciate the food of different cultures, possessing no inclination towards any ethnic or racial prejudice—dominate the personal accounts of living in the community.

This enthusiasm for sharing fond memories of interethnic friends can be explained by two factors. First, it could simply be that interviewees—alongside most of the community members who were involved with *Boyle Heights*—really did enjoy a plethora of enduring and rich friendships with peers from a wide range of ethnicities, and that such experiences turned out to be the most formative ones during their years of living in the community. During one of my conversations with Cedrick Shimo—a Japanese American who was also one of the oral history interviewees—I asked about the existence of interethnic tensions. Shimo was quite forthcoming in saying that “I guess there were negative aspects to living in Boyle Heights. There were gang fights and the Pachucos

were famous for that.” However, he also went on to say that “I never saw any of it though. I had Mexican friends and Russian friends I have, but I can’t recall any fights, or if there was anything negative. It’s just that our reputation was negative.” Besides Shimo, another interviewee, Atoy Rudolf Wilson, also affirmed similar feelings and observations. From my own personal experience of speaking to the older Boyle Heights, I can attest that their recollections of the community are overwhelmingly positive, compelling, and nostalgic.

In addition to a sincere fondness for their places of childhood and teenage years, these interviewees may have also, in a sense, been “pre-conditioned” as to what they felt was proper to discuss in interviews with the *Boyle Heights* team. After all, as noted earlier, the *Boyle Heights Project* was pitched from the very outset as an examination on the multicultural aspect of the community. In the preparation stages of setting up the oral histories, JANM staff had informed interviewees that the exhibition would focus on historic interethnic relationships and multiethnic social aspect of Boyle Heights. Therefore, interviewees could certainly have been providing information that they felt would be most useful and relevant to the *Boyle Heights Project*. Nonetheless, it is crucial not to overstate the impact that project descriptions may have had on the interviewees, for the narrative of Boyle Heights as a special multicultural neighborhood was one that was already deeply ingrained in the minds of many older residents. As one staff member put it, “This is a very powerful narrative and I’ve heard it from a lot of others [outside the exhibition] as well. No prompting [was] necessary.”

But while sincere nostalgia for Boyle Heights and consideration for the scope of the exhibit might explain the vastly positive outpouring of memories in the oral histories,

they do not explain the attitude of fear, anxiety, and hesitation that Kim alluded to earlier when the individuals requested that comments about race-based antagonisms be kept off the record. In close examination of some oral histories, such anxieties also appear to emerge during moments when interviewees are asked to divulge details on interethnic tensions. This is evident in the oral history interview with Hershey Eisenberg, a Russian Jew who was born in Boyle Heights and lived there for twenty-four years. The beginning of his interview conveys positive and nostalgic reflections on multiethnic interactions in Boyle Heights. All of questions and answers during the first two thirds of his interview focus on positive aspects of interethnic community relationships. For instance, when talking about childhood playmates and pastimes, Eisenberg extols the interethnic camaraderie that he experienced with other students at Roosevelt High School:

“Roosevelt High was the most amazing experience anyone could have gone through. It was really a melting pot. No one had any bad feelings about the other person’s color, their religion, or their beliefs. We worked together. Very seldom did we have any problems.” Eisenberg initially presents an unproblematic depiction of the racial dynamics in his high school, which he compared to a melting pot where no one experienced or harbored discrimination towards each other.

Four pages later however, when asked about the subject of zoot suiters in Roosevelt High School, Eisenberg complicates his earlier statement:

The zoot suits...you have to understand that the only group that really didn’t completely gel at Roosevelt High School were the Mexican kids. You had a lot of them that were really into it and everything, but there were a lot of them that didn’t even go to high school...So the kids at Roosevelt High School, we had gangs. There were gang fights...There really wasn’t a real schism between the groups. There were all pretty good.

Here, Eisenberg reveals that there were racial tensions that pitted certain students in Roosevelt High against the rest of the student body. At this point however, Eisenberg still ends his description of zoot suiters and Mexican gangs with a positive assertion that glosses over serious difficulties or schisms between groups and gangs in high school. The interview then continues with Eisenberg elaborating upon the zoot suit riots, and Kim prodding Eisenberg for more details on the subject of gangs and rivalries. What follows is a moment in which Eisenberg finally reveals that tensions between gangs often flowed over into violence:

Eisenberg: ...But there was animosity with the Jews and the Mexicans. They had gang fights. I was in a couple of gang fights. That's part of growing up, I guess...

Kim: Were there main gangs that had rivalries? What were some of the--?

Eisenberg: Oh yeah, but they were not—the Saxons are a gang, okay? Let's face it, let's not kid ourselves. We met together. If we had to have a fight, we'd stay together, but we didn't go out looking for fights. That wasn't our reason for being, but it's still a gang... The zoot suitors, they had the White Fence gang, the Hazard gang...

This moment in the interview is brief yet telling. Despite Eisenberg's original claims, animosities and tensions did erupt along racial lines among students at Roosevelt High. In this situation, it was between gangs comprised of Jewish and Latino youths during the 1940s.

What is striking is that indications of interethnic tensions are usually absent during the beginning of the interview. As Eisenberg's interview demonstrated, personal narratives of Boyle Heights typically commenced with positive and nostalgic recollections of community interethnic relationships as peaceful, tolerant, and symbiotic.

This is possibly due to my earlier point that interviewees gave their answers based on preconditioned thoughts and perceptions on interview expectations. However, careful prodding by Kim, an experienced interviewer and oral historian, revealed a conflicting set of undercurrents lying beneath the rosy recollections as references to cross-ethnic conflicts sometimes came to the surface. This striking pattern showed that interethnic relationships in the community, however positive they initially seemed, were in fact complex and sometimes double-edged.

Hints of conflicted feelings, tensions, or animosities involving Boyle Heights' Jews and Hispanics cropped up in other oral histories and accounts of the neighborhood. In a trajectory similar to Eisenberg's interview, Japanese American Ruth (Fujii) Brandt began her oral history with nostalgic reminiscences and statements affirming the virtues of growing up in a multiethnic neighborhood where residents engaged productively in cross-cultural interactions (i.e. sharing foods and forming friendships). But nearly halfway into her interview, Brandt makes a statement about Jewish students at Roosevelt High after some prodding again from the same interviewer (Kim) who interviewed Eisenberg

SK: What was the difference in perception of what Garfield kids were like versus Roosevelt kids?

RB: I shouldn't say this.

SK: Say it.

RB: Well, the Roosevelt kids were mainly Jewish, very aggressive students, aggressive people. The students at Garfield High School were more laid back...

Brandt's brief remark about Jewish high school students seems rather innocuous and far from offensive. But it is perhaps true that her characterization of Jewish students did not conform to the positive perspective on multiethnicity that exhibition participants all seemed to embrace. What seems striking about this moment is simply how reluctant and anxious Brandt seemed when asked to divulge this minor comment that nonetheless went against the grain of the overarching narrative that current and former residents were giving to *Boyle Heights* organizers. Similar to the case with Eisenberg, such details seemed to have been offered with degrees of reluctance on the part of the interviewees.

By gleaning from sources outside the moments of slippages from Eisenberg's and Brandt's oral histories, one can find clearer indications that interethnic tensions did exist, particularly between Boyle Heights' Jews and Mexican Americans. In a passage that appeared in a 1954 article in Boyle Heights from *Fortnight* magazine that Boyle Heights historians have cited on many occasions for its hyperbolic descriptions of the community's ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity.⁴⁹ While most of this article focused on the precise themes highlighted in *Boyle Heights*, such as multiculturalism, peaceful multiethnic community formations, and model citizenship of residents, references to ethnically-centered tensions were also embedded within its passages. Under one section titled, "Melting Pot," the article noted, "It would be more wish than fact to say that there is no prejudice or discrimination, however, subtle, but it is a lot better than it used to be. A year ago a couple of Jewish kids were beaten up in the playground of Hollenbeck Junior High School, but 15 years ago the Mexican and Jewish gangs engaged in violent

⁴⁹ "Boyle Heights: California's Sociological Fishbowl," *Fortnight*, October 20, 1954, 20-23.

skirmishes that resulted in serious injuries and deaths and could only be halted by tear gas.”⁵⁰ In piecing together the striking last sentence of this excerpt with certain comments from the oral histories—not only from Eisenberg and perhaps Brandt, but also from other interviews/oral histories with Wilson, Russian Molokan James Alex Tolmasov, and African American project consultant Albert Johnson who spoke of community gangs pitted against each other along ethnic lines—one can deduce with certainty that ethnic tensions in the form of Jewish, Mexican-American, and possibly other ethnic gangs existed in Boyle Heights, was made known in sources available to Boyle Heights organizers, but ultimately kept outside the scope of the exhibition.⁵¹

In addition to Jewish and Mexican-American tensions in the form of pre-war gangs during the late 1930s and early 1940s, the presence of post-war lingering tensions between these two ethnic groups emerged quite overtly in another *Boyle Heights* oral history, this time by Mexican American activist Eddie Ramirez. Rather colorful and less inhibited than his oral history counterparts in expressing his feelings, Ramirez spoke openly about feelings of ambivalence that he harbored towards the Jewish establishment and political impact in Boyle Heights. Throughout his interview, Ramirez made allusions to a socio-economic gap that he saw separating Jews from Mexicans. Consistently describing Jewish neighbors as wealthy and politically mobilized, Ramirez pitted Mexican Americans less socio-economically privileged and sometimes at odds with the Jews. Interestingly, like Eisenberg and Brandt, Ramirez starts out his interview with fond reminiscences of life in Boyle Heights, including friendly relations with Jewish

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁵¹ Atoy Rudolf Wilson, transcript of interview with JANM, 34. James Alex Tolmasov, transcript of interview with JANM, 35-37.

shopkeepers on Soto Street (one of the community's main thoroughfares) during his childhood in the 1930s. But halfway into the interview, Ramirez suddenly makes a series of cutting remarks in regards to competition between Jews and Mexican Americans when it came to political maneuvering in 1960s East LA over control of community politics and judgeships. Using strong language, he states:

I'll be eighty years old in March, and wisdom comes with age, you don't learn it in book. But the Jewish *modus operandi* to get at you is to look for a skeleton in the closet and publicly scandalize you. And they control the media. They control television; they control the news media. Thank God that we have a community newspaper that at least enlightens us with a view from the other side of the fence. But you take the *L.A. Times*. They'll do anything. You look back how they scandalized Loretta Sanchez... You notice they don't do that to the Blacks though. They're afraid of the Blacks.⁵²

Whether or not Ramirez's factual content of his accusations was real or not, his feelings of frustration and anger were. In his history of Chicano activism in Los Angeles, Rudolfo Acuna in *Anything but Mexican* writes of simmering tensions during 1950s-1960s Los Angeles that fractured Mexican and Jewish political alliances, which was already on tenuous ground.⁵³ As Mexican American (Chicano), African American, and Jewish coalitions all fought for increased prominence in the city and state systems of political representation, they often found themselves at odds with each other with tensions erupting not only along ethnic lines but also along socioeconomic class differences. Ramirez's sentiments were clear indications of such tensions boiling over into the politics of Boyle Heights, which was never mentioned in the exhibition.

⁵² Eddie Ramirez, transcript of interview with JANM, 15.

⁵³ Rudolfo Acuna, *Anything but Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 1995), 45-48.

By noting these moments within oral histories and historical articles, readers obtain by glimpses into realities of Boyle Heights' interethnic and class relations which are more complex than presented in the exhibition, or even originally indicated in the oral histories themselves. It is also important to note that revelations of interethnic tensions did not always emerge through stories of outright hostilities and conflicts. During his interview, Johnson noted that:

I think there were definitely some issues between the different groups. That's not to say, there wasn't a peaceful co-existence. But to what extent did people really connect and to what extent did people really embrace each other? That's not to say that it didn't go on and that it didn't happen, but on what scale did it happen and how prevalent really was it? Was it really a matter of 'We're all in this together?' Are we here because we have to live here, so we get along? I think there's always degrees to these types of things.

Taking Johnson's questions to heart when analyzing the oral histories can also be another way of demonstrating that interethnic community relations were in fact more complicated and problematic than the representations in the exhibition. Throughout the oral histories, there were multiple revelations and prevailing themes showing that differing degrees of closeness existed amongst different groups and individuals who lived in the community.

Certain allusions in interviews seemed to suggest limits to the interethnic relationships and interactions taking place in Boyle Heights. This is highlighted through a look into the ethnic distribution patterns of Boyle Heights residential districts. Many of the oral histories implied that Boyle Heights—in spite of its remarkable ethnic diversity—was also loosely segregated along racial lines in many ways, not only in gangs, but also in residential and socializing patterns. When asked to describe the ethnic geography of Boyle Heights, most interviewees spoke of different ethnic districts in the

neighborhood. For instance, the Russian Molokan population lived in the Russian Flats area and Whittier Street, the Jews lived around City Terrace and Brooklyn Avenue, while Mexican Americans lived throughout the city but in greater concentration towards the northern section of the district.⁵⁴ African American interviewee Mollie Wilson Murphy even mentioned certain streets as off-limits to African Americans: “Certain streets you couldn’t live on. And the only way they found it out is when some of the African Americans became a little prosperous and wanted to move into certain areas, they found that they couldn’t live there...I think Cincinnati Street was one...it was kind of a big squawk on that, because one of the blacks wanted to move on Cincinnati and found out he couldn’t.”⁵⁵ Not only did ethnic populations in Boyle Heights reside in loosely segregated patterns, but each ethnic group, especially the older adults, also tended to frequent stores run by members of the same ethnicity.⁵⁶

These types of residential and consumer patterns alluded directly to the notion of varying degrees of friendship and aloofness that existed between residents of Boyle Heights. Generally speaking, second-generation immigrants in Boyle Heights were much more comfortable than their parents in socializing with members of different identities (although as indicated through prior admissions on youth gangs, such interethnic relationships were not always peaceful and free from animosity). The presence of segregated residential and consumer patterns would perhaps be attributable more to first

⁵⁴ Kate Bolotin, transcript of interview with JANM, 8. Claire (Orlosoroff) Stein, transcript of interview with JANM, 7. Mollie (Wilson) Murphy, Mary (Murakami) Nishi and Sandie (Saito) Okada, transcript of interview with JANM, 20. Hershey Eisenberg, transcript of interview with JANM, 1.

⁵⁵ Atoy Wilson, transcript of interview with JANM, 18.

⁵⁶ James Alex Tolmasov, transcript of interview with JANM, 12.

generation members of Boyle Heights, given that they would have comprised the majority of home renters and patrons. But references to lighter degrees of racism or racial segregation by first generation immigrants do emerge frequently in the oral history interviews. They range from off-handed remarks such as “When you’re young, there’s no discrimination in your mind. Prejudice is put into you by the elders,”⁵⁷ to references of parents’ social circles rarely venturing outside their ethnicity due to limited English skills,⁵⁸ to stories of strong resistance against children dating outside ethnic lines. This last point is briefly discussed in the interviews of Kate Bolotin, Ruth Brandt, Hershey Eisenberg and Leo Frumkin who all made references either to parental objections or intraethnic social pressures when it came to interethnic dating.

Romance and Family

Boyle Heights’ perspective on interethnic dating and marriage is covered very briefly, yet tellingly through two photographs. The first one shows a Japanese American issei holding his hapa⁵⁹ child in 1923 along the following text:

Dr. Fusataro Nakaya sits for a studio portrait with eldest son, Robert Yoshio...Due to California’s antimiscegenation laws, Dr. Nakaya, who was a Japanese immigrant, and his wife, Edith Morton, a European American, were forced to go to Tijuana to marry. Edith temporarily lost her U.S. citizenship for marrying an alien ineligible for citizenship. She was forced to apply for naturalization after the law changed in order to regain her citizenship.

⁵⁷ Mollie (Wilson) Murphy, Mary (Murakami) Nishi and Sandie (Saito) Okada, transcript of interview with JANM, 21.

⁵⁸ Albert Johnson, interview with the author, August 13, 2008.

⁵⁹ Originally deriving from the Hawaii pidgin term, *hapa haole* meaning “half white,” the word hapa has since been used by the Asian American community to describe Asians of mix-raced descent.

The second photo shows a Japanese American grandmother posing with her happa grandchild in 1990. In both of these photographs, the subject of interethnic marriage is treated very delicately, given the exhibition's overall reticence on the subject. Yet, the exhibition only presented such unions through a restricted lens that focused on the happy and intimate familial bonds resulting from interethnic unions, and the challenges that such couples faced from the racism of mainstream establishments. What the oral histories reveal, and in fact complicate the exhibition's depiction of harmonious interethnic marriage/family, is that residents who engaged in interethnic dating also faced staunch resistance from members of their own community. The following statements all made it clear that interracial marriage was something that took a lot of courage due to societal resistance from members of one's own race: "...you wouldn't marry somebody who's not Jewish. I mean, you just wouldn't do it. You might have good friends, but you just never married somebody who was not Jewish." (Frumkin 21) and "See, we were brought up—in other words, when you were old enough, you found a nice Russian boy, and you married a nice Russian boy. You stayed in the religion and all that." (Bolotin 25)

Although speaking about the dangers, of interreligious dating, Eisenberg's comments on the subject can also add another layer of evidence and understanding to societal resistance against interethnic dating, in this case within the Jewish community:

(Interviewer) Darci Iki: [Was there much inter-religious dating?]

HE: No, not really. It was quite different than it is today. You had to learn how to accept that. It was really quite different. I guess it's true of any denomination. If you married outside your religion, you could be ostracized.

In one particular case of interracial dating and marriage that took place among all the oral histories, Ruth Brandt (a Japanese American) spoke of her decision to date and marry Robert Brandt, a Jewish American. In Ruth's case, she faced disapproval from her mother, who "didn't like the idea that I was dating [Robert]," and eventually had to elope to get married and then hide the fact from her parents for "a little while."⁶⁰ Although the oral history doesn't delve into the Brandt parents' reactions on the marriage, not does it elaborate on the objections of Ruth's mother to the interracial aspect of Ruth's marriage, the possibility exists that her mother's apprehension towards the marriage was likely rooted in Robert's Jewish background. Statements such as these do raise some interesting questions which would might have shed more light on intraethnic resistance (in this case from the first-generation immigrant) to interethnic dating (by second generation immigrants) had they been pursued in greater depth during the oral history, "We've (Ruth and Robert) been married fifty-four years. It's really interesting because my mother kept saying, "You know, that marriage isn't going to last. You'll be lucky if it lasts three months."⁶¹

Historic Gangsters

Despite the fact that stories of interethnic conflicts, divisions, and disconnects do emerge in fleeting glimpses through the oral histories, such revelations on the whole are still few and far between. On one hand, this situation in the *Boyle Heights Project* can be linked to various reasons, such as common tendencies by those being interviewed for oral histories to couch their youths and their lives in nostalgic terms, and a reluctance to

⁶⁰ Ruth (Fujii) Brandt, transcript of interview with JANM, 23.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

distract interviewees and potential audiences from genuine fondness for their community. As revealed in earlier statements by Shorr, and Johnson, project participants and former residents were mostly inclined to speak winsomely of their community and disinclined to divulge criticisms. Kim also shared through her earlier statements that exhibition participants were keenly mindful and anxious over possible negative effects that any revelation on interethnic tensions might have.

I surmise that a part of the reluctance of exhibition participants to speak extensively on this topic is attributable to unspoken undercurrents and dynamics that were already present in the community even before JANM conceptualized *Boyle Heights* 1999. During a 1997 panel discussion on Boyle Heights history sponsored by the Getty Research Institute, panel members were asked to share their thoughts on conflicts that had taken place in the community, presumably amongst Boyle Heights' minority racial groups.⁶² Rather than speak at length about interethnic and cross-racial conflicts, members of the panel gave relatively brief responses which only hinted at potential answers to the question and called for a need to consider conflicts in relation to the positive bonds that were forged across racial and ethnic lines in the community. As is evident in Paul Botello's response, members of the panel were reluctant and hesitant about venturing into this subject in depth and called instead for a need to shift attention to positive, productive dimensions of community interethnic relations, "...as far as I am concerned, I have a lot of stories that I can say about the problems, the Zoot Suiters being harassed and conflicts between races, but I like to also focus on some of the positive

⁶² "Local Libraries/Local Knowledge. Interweaving Histories panel discussion," event transcript, February 22, 1997. Panel members were Judy Branfman, Paul Botello, Lindsey Haley, Henry Ronquillo, Leland T. Saito, and George J. Sánchez.

aspects. You are right, but I think that it continues today, but a way of addressing it would also be to point out the positive influences.” To glean why this sense of unease was present, and how hesitation to talk at length about interracial conflicts, one of historian George Sanchez’s remarks during the panel can perhaps shed some light:

It is clear that there had been lots of tensions in Boyle Heights for a long long time between groups. It is very important, I think when we do the history of an interethnic community like this, that we stress both the places in which people have come together and cooperated and the places where they have had conflict. And both are the important part of the story...I think that for me what is important is that if we are ever to learn to live together, and it is sort of a constant process, we have to take into account that both parts are always part of a communities history. (sic) That people break through ‘difference’ while there are people who are unable to...

Both of these statements constitute a direct appeal for balance and fairness when it comes to treatment of historic interethnic conflicts—to always consider them in perspective.

At the same time, Sanchez’s response also hints at underlying contestations over citizenship—over questions of self-governance, legibility, and worthiness—that could impact any perceived lack of harmony between Boyle Heights’ racialized groups.

According to attitudes that dictate much of today’s liberal democratic and racial discourse, those who end up at the bottom of the social, political, or economic rung allow this to happen because of personal failings or lack of effort. Thus in a multiracial, multiethnic community, it is possible that those who fail to live harmoniously with neighboring races and ethnicities embody personal shortcomings as citizens, unable to overcome their attitudes of intolerance, and incapable of conducting themselves with civility when it comes to living with those from different backgrounds and beliefs. On the flip side, those who thrived in such an atmosphere became good citizens.

In the end, the exhibition downplayed stories of interethnic tensions and intraethnic racisms. This is, for instance, applicable to the exhibition's treatment of zoot suiters. Historically speaking, responsibility for the Zoot Suit Riots has been hotly debated between both sides of the riots—ethnic minority youth on one side and the white establishment making up the police and military personnel on the other—with both accusing the other of provoking and perpetuating the violence. During the period of Zoot Suit Riots, mainstream newspapers such as the *LA Times* and the *Los Angeles Examiner* seared certain images into public memory—i.e. photos of bloodied Mexican American zoot suiters getting arrested or sitting in jail—along with articles depicting zoot suiters as criminal youth delinquents. In terms of this debate, the exhibition gestures toward siding with the ethnic minority youth, and links responsibility for the riots to police and military brutality. At the same time, *Boyle Heights* also takes steps to minimize the threatening aspects of zoot suiter's image. In the exhibition, newspaper clippings showing arrested zoot suiters were indeed shown. However, *Boyle Heights* also counteracts these images by including competing representations of zoot suit youths that mitigate their threatening elements. One photograph shows a pachuco posing at home with his draped pants; yet he is a smiling, adorable three-year-old. Two photos show zoot suiters posing as individuals while the other shows a smiling and relaxed Nisei zoot suiter posing for the camera with his non-zoot suit friend. In all of these photos, zoot suiters are separated from the most frightening incarnation of zoot suiters—which is in the form of large groups and gangs. There is one photograph where zoot suiters are shown as a group. However, everyone in this image is female, and they are attending a YWCA program. In the process of all this,

photos of zoot suiters who may have engaged in violent, non-heteronormative, and delinquent behaviors are offset by endearing images.

In addition to zoot suiters, the exhibit also includes a group photo of young 1940s teenagers who belonged to The Cougars. According to member Cedrick Shimo, the Cougars primarily engaged in recreational activities, but developed a somewhat dubious reputation in Boyle Heights and Little Tokyo. In Shimo's own words during a JANM public program titled "Youth Culture in Boyle Heights" he recounts:

In the late 1930s, the name of *Cougars* within the Japanese community conjured up an image of a gang of juvenile delinquents... Within our club I'll admit we had several teenagers with rough edges—normal exuberant energy found among youths of all generations. They, together with friends of similar tendencies from other clubs, especially the Olivers of Little Tokyo and many unaffiliated workers from the Grand Central Mark were capable of and did raise holy hell—although very mild by today's standard. Dance parties were crashed, and on one occasion the police riot squad had to be called to the Boyle Heights International Institute to quell a fight... Also immediately following a Nisei Week Parade and Ondo dancing, fights broke out which again required police riot squads to restore order. The President of the Japanese American Citizen's League once chastised us and even threatened to put Little Tokyo off-limits to the Cougars... Although the Cougars were initially accused of instigating this commotion, we were eventually completely exonerated. But the damage was done. The result was instant notoriety and its spillover tainted even the majority of members who were not involved... Interestingly enough all of Boyle Heights was known as a tough neighborhood, and we Cougars certainly helped foster that image along with our zoot suit and *Pachooka* (sic) friends.⁶³

Shimo's amusing testimony provides some description of Cougar "rowdyism" and acknowledges that Cougars on occasion engaged in mildly disruptive activities. But the case of the Cougars sheds additional light on *Boyle Heights'* treatment of community members who might have been regarded as youth delinquents and gangsters. In the

⁶³ Cedrick Shimo. "The *Cougars* of Boyle Heights," unpublished speech transcript, November 18, 2001.

exhibit itself, the main representation of Cougars is a cheerful photograph of Japanese and Mexican American teenagers during a Terminal Island baseball outing. Shimo's speech provided elaboration on the story behind the Cougars, but his story is presented in humorous and non-threatening ways. In his speech, he acknowledges the negative reputation that came to surround the Cougars, but insists that the Cougars (including himself) were actually innocent kids who spent most of their time playing on athletic fields and belonging to reputable institutions such as the Boy Scouts. Thus, JANM's representation of the Cougars represented another way of acknowledging but disarming the feared reputation of gangsters in Boyle Heights—first affirm the existence of this reputation, then deny its truthfulness through witty storytelling by a charming and humorous 82-year-old former Cougar (affectionately known as “troublemaker” within JANM staff and volunteers) on the reality of Cougar life.

Besides mitigating the threat of zoot suiter images by implicitly posing them in stark contrast to widespread portrayals of present-day gangs, and by contradicting gangster reputations with disarming cheer and humor, the exhibition also downplayed accounts within oral histories describing non-model protests. The oral histories of James Alex Tolmasov and Leo Frumkin discuss behaviors by Boyle Heights residents which by no means fit within the model citizen framework. For instance, while Boyle Heights highlighted non-violent, successful, and socially productive forms of protest, including a peaceful protest against Gerald Smith's speech invitation at Polytechnic High School, Frumkin offers the following account of another protest against the speech, this time at Polytechnic High School:

So we had the student strike, and then our youth group swelled from that point. I think we got up to about seventy-five members real quick... When I got arrested... I heard the police sirens coming, so I ran downstairs at the Board of Education. The cops were there beginning to break people up, so I start screaming at the cops. So they came in, grabbed hold of me, and arrested me. But when I was arrested, they put me in a police car and kids—I don't know—eight, nine, ten kids piled into the police car. I mean, literally, they just piled in... Kids would just keep saying [You take them, you're taking us"] I think there were three or four cars and there must have been—they maybe arrested seven or eight of us, and there must have been ten kids in each car. The cop who was driving it drove it, and the guy that was with him had to get out. I mean, it was—and these kids were trying to shake the cars and they chased the cars all the way down to Georgia Street where they took us and stayed out there. I don't know how long we were in jail, three, four, five hours at the most. And they made so much noise, we could hear them outside screaming and yelling, "Let 'em go. Let 'em go. Probably a couple hundred kids out there screaming and yelling.

Although Frumkin alluded to a photograph taken during this incident that was given to JANM, it is not surprising that JANM opted instead to show the more sedate and peaceful demonstration that took place in Polytechnic High School. Such accounts were not included in *Boyle Heights*, and neither were the additional revelations of non-model groups and behaviors mentioned in oral histories. Subjects such as Mexican American anarchists, violent gang activity during the 30s and 40s, fights of middle school children throwing rocks, and of protesters climbing fences in droves and conspicuously absent for the sake of preserving the image of model citizenship in the exhibition.

Summary

In my analysis of the exhibition, I argued that *Boyle Heights* opted not to include stories of interethnic tensions, community gang activity, and non-model behaviors from the final version that was presented to the public. I also asserted that many of these decisions to excise stories were due to lingering concerns by exhibition parties that such stories—if included in the exhibition—would risk painting Boyle Heights residents and

their community in a negative light, as non-normative and non-model elements of American society. While it might be tempting to simply conclude that the exhibition distorted community history by whitewashing it, the reality is that exhibition organizers were operating within a highly complex and delicate set of relationships. In order to acquire most of the photos, artifacts, interviews, and stories that ultimately comprised JANM's collection of Boyle Heights materials, the exhibition staff needed to gain the trust, enthusiasm, and support of the community members and donors. According to Kim, earning the confidence of community members and then publicizing an unflattering portrait of their lives would in essence amount to irresponsible betrayal of trust on the part of the museum. She expressed that, "There were racism...going on in Boyle Heights, but it would have not been responsible to present these in an exhibition... The museum was accountable to the people who took part in exhibition and also had to be aware of what people wanted to see." From Kim's perspective—as one speaking on behalf of JANM, and also from a personal code of commitment and ethics—she was clearly bound by a sense of accountability towards exhibition participants who opened up to her by countless hours over the course of several years reminiscing about the community, sharing intimate details about their lives and communicating their anticipation for the project. Underlying the substantial amount of time that exhibition organizers and participants spent together—sharing countless stories, poring over artifacts and images, and hammering out logistics of the exhibition—was the understanding that JANM and Kim were interested in a representation that cast Boyle Heights in a positive light around notions of "diversity as community" and "intersections," that is, the forging of bonds between different races, ethnicities, spaces, and generations. This meant that from the

outset of the project, JANM was operating out of numerous boundaries and limitations, which could very well have produced negative repercussions for JANM's and Kim's credibility within the community had these constraints been disregarded. JANM and Kim also would have violated the bond of trust that was forged so painstakingly over a period of months and years with the community participants of the exhibition.

During our conversation, Kim also brought up the point that, "There's the fact that with presentation of internal challenges, someone needs to be there to explain the contexts and intricacies and complexities of the situation and environment. With a museum exhibition, there's no one to do that." This brings us to the question of whether JANM could have organized a viable exhibition that presented "balanced" views of Boyle Heights? And what would have been the repercussions for not only JANM, but also for the Boyle Heights community? Kim's point suggests that JANM simply did not have the resources and forum to pull off an exhibition that could have examined both praiseworthy and questionable aspects of Boyle Heights' history in a thorough and responsible manner. Completing *Boyle Heights* required tremendous resources from JANM during a time in institutional history when finances and staffing were at their height. To create an even more complex exhibition would have required additional finances, staff, and time than what was available. And is suggested by the question of "What might *Boyle Heights* have looked like if it had included unflattering stories of community history," curating a balanced exhibition that could still satisfy and benefit most parties would have also involved a greater output of creativity than what was already channeled into the exhibition.

In sum, the objective of this thesis has been to cast new light—through analysis of *Boyle Heights*—on the limitations that racial/ethnic institutions must operate out of when seeking to portray their communities in a more positive light, or when striving to acquire more citizenship rights and resources. In most situations, the limitations posed by requirements of model citizenship are overlooked, as are the consequences of neglecting stories and individuals who do not conform to desired standards. For this reason, this thesis sets out to address this shortcoming, especially when pertaining to a cultural and ethnic institution such as JANM. At the same time, the conversation does not end here, nor does it stop with a wholesale criticism of ethnic institutions which cannot tell the “whole” story. Rather, this thesis urges us to critically examine the limitations and constraints within which racial subjectivity operates. At the same time, it also represents the beginning of a conversation, a conversation which must also grapple with the dilemmas and limitations which confront ethnic populations and institutions in their efforts to thrive and succeed amidst the stratified, multi-ethnic society that characterizes today’s American society.

Afterward

One day in August of 2008 during the midst of my research for this project, I came across a posting on a Myspace page dedicated to Boyle Heights—it was an invitation to the opening of a small exhibit called “East of the River: A Boyle Heights History Project” in Teocintli, a small boutique located across the street from Roosevelt High School. Out of curiosity, I decided to drop by the event on the evening of August 15. When I entered the crowded gallery space in the back of the store, I immediately noticed lots of artwork by local community artists—silkscreen prints of familiar neighborhood sites, and a large mural reminiscent of ones that dot many buildings in Boyle Heights. I soon realized that many of these pieces were sponsored by Self-Help Graphics, which also produced artwork for *The Boyle Heights Project*. But then I came across several makeshift text panels and historic photos, and noticed that many of the actually appeared to be taken from the *Boyle Heights* catalogue. In this enlightening and amusing moment, I witnessed first-hand just how an exhibit like *Boyle Heights* had the capacity to motivate others in the community to execute public projects that celebrate their neighborhood and take pride in their local heritage.

In continuing my research, I would also learn that Boyle Heights became the inspiration behind two community projects revolving around neighborhood history. First, the exhibit compelled Diana Ybarra-Tiscareno, who had served on Boyle Heights’ community advisory board, to start the Boyle Heights Historic Society (BHHS). In describing how she started the society, Ybarra-Tiscareno mentioned a comment by fellow project advisor Bud Weber who said during the closing days of *Boyle Heights*, “Diana, we’ve got to keep this going.” With the idea for starting an organization to preserve the

relationships forged during the exhibit and to continue preservation efforts on Boyle Heights history, Diana spoke to other advisors, including Hershey Eisenberg, who also vehemently agreed with the idea. Thus, efforts to establish a historic society began almost immediately. Members of the historic society now meet once a month at Hollenbeck Park to discuss future directions for the organization, as well as ideas for future projects. During my conversation with Ybarra-Tiscareno, she mentioned that BHHS was working with the Office of Historic Resources, City of Los Angeles, to identify historic buildings and sites in Boyle Heights for preservation.⁶⁴

Both of these examples are inspiring to hear because they attest to the power of museum exhibits to not only educate large audiences, but to also inspire people from the community to take ownership of their own history, embark on their own history projects, and continue the commemoration of a remarkable story on multiethnicity and interethnicity. At the same time, meaningful exhibits also inspire outsiders to come in and commence complementary projects, as was the case with film maker Betsy Kalin, whose upcoming documentary on Boyle Heights incorporates many of the same themes and personalities from the exhibit.⁶⁵ Interestingly, all three projects also continue the exhibit's perspective on historic interethnic harmony and model citizens (although it remains to be seen if Kalin's documentary will also incorporate different viewpoints.) All of these projects were only possible because *Boyle Heights* managed to depict the community in positive and uplifting ways. And by succeeding so dramatically in this aspect, *Boyle*

⁶⁴ For more information about this project, go to the website for SurveyLA at <http://preservation.lacity.org/survey>.

⁶⁵ "Interview with Betsy Kalin, Documentary Filmmaker, on the Enduring Power of Boyle Heights," <http://thesmilingspiderblog.com/2009/03/30/interview-with-betsy-kalin-documentary-filmmaker-on-the-enduring-power-of-boyle-heights> (accessed September 21, 2009).

Heights has come to represent what many contemporary community exhibits aspire to accomplish.

While the lingering public interest over Boyle Heights history highlight ways in which empowering and dignifying depictions of community can pay off, questions regarding the silences characterizing Boyle Heights remain. Given that *Boyle Heights* was a high-profile undertaking designed to appeal to mass audiences and diverse constituencies, was there any way that the exhibit could have covered subjects such as interethnic conflicts, intraethnic racism, and gangster activities without disturbing, angering, or misinforming its audiences? This is an especially important question, not in order to critique the limitations of ethnic cultural institutions, but in order to understand that institutions and communities operate out of infrastructural and social political constraints. What exactly does the necessity of downplaying certain episodes in the exhibit illustrate when it comes to understanding the dynamics of racial subject formation and model citizenship in contemporary American society? What institutions, communities, and individuals do to address and break out of these limitations posed by the socio-political structures in this country? In closing, I would like to pose a couple of questions for scholars, museum specialists, and exhibition audiences. Is it possible for museums and public history projects to present exhibits on ethnic/racial communities that inspire audiences, but still manage to cover stories falling outside the scope of model citizenship in ways that are sensitive and thought-provoking? And what are the possibilities for accomplishing such an endeavor?

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